
ISUNA HASEKURA
SPICE & WOLF
VOL. 14

Spice & Wolf

Vol. 14

By Isuna Hasekura
Illustrated by Jyuu Ayakura




"Quite a coincidence."
"Indeed it is," Lawrence said. This girl had always been difficult for him, but he forced her name out after a cough. "It has been a while, Miss Elsa."
The girl entrusted with the church in the village of Tereo: Elsa Schtingheim

Philon Zimgrundt,
owner of a general
store in Lenos

"Oh. Here
I was
wondering
who it
could be,
but it's you,
Le Roi."

Le Roi
The Bookseller

His large, round body
stumbled through the
door, and he gave a loud
"Wah!"

The big man who
had fallen face-first
on the floor had a
mountain of goods on
his back.

Lawrence held her tighter, then pushed her against the wall. Then—

"Not...not here...!" Holo tried to push Lawrence back, with earnest strength this time. "You...foo—"

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VOLUME XIV

ISUNA HASEKURA

YEN ON
NEW YORK

SPICE AND WOLF, Volume 14
ISUNA HASEKURA

Translation: Paul Starr

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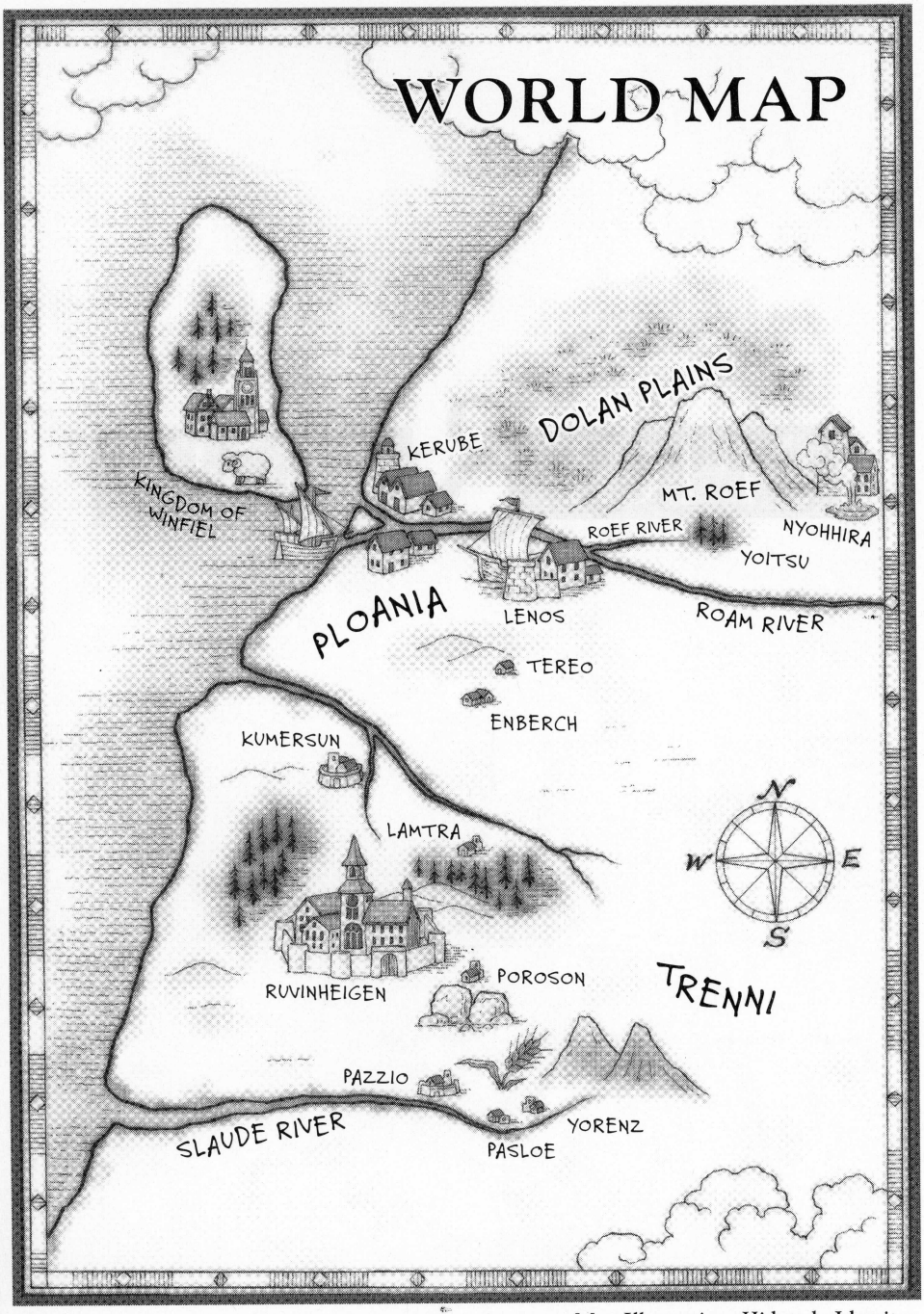
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SPICE & WOLF



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PROLOGUE



"We need to talk."

So she had said, and immediately upon entering the room, he was entranced by the sight that greeted him.

So lovely, he thought.

She was sitting on the bed, gazing out the window. That was all.

However, beautiful as it was, that was not to say it was simple. It was true that she had handsome features, and her brown skin gave her an exotic, foreign charm. But more than that, her profile had a clarity to it, like a crystal that had been polished round, until it was free of any edges.

If humans were prone to locking horns, both giving and receiving injury as they pursued their passions, then the profile he saw seemed somehow far removed from all those tragedies.

He spied a chair, and eased himself down onto it.

She did not look at him, but waited until he was seated to speak. "In Lenos, there's a dealer of goods named Philon."

Her words came suddenly, but he did not ask after her meaning. Something about that profile made such questions seem tactless.

"At least, he appears to be a goods dealer. But behind the facade, he's a supplier of mercenaries." She finally looked at him. "If you

and your companion give him my name, I am certain he will tell you something that will be of use to you."

"Should you—" he began slowly, as though not to destroy the delicate mood. "Should you really be telling me such things?"

The mercenary world had its own rules. It was governed not by the merchant's calculations of profit and loss, nor by the knight's bonds of honor, but by principles that were elusive to all who did not live in that world. How would things go for a merchant who intruded upon it?

At the very least, it might well cause problems for the one who was sitting on the bed.

"He owes me that much," she said with a smile, still sitting on said bed. She looked out the window again.

He found himself thinking back to the nun who had lent them that battered old blanket when they had first set out, saying she no longer needed it.

"Philon procures goods, as well as the merchant marine reckless enough to carry them, for mercenaries. If fighting has awoken in the northlands, he should at least know where the money is flowing and from whom."

Those who undertook bringing mercenaries necessary supplies were as important to them as their own hearts, and any fighter would surely try to hide them from outsiders as much as possible.

Given that, the girl who had given him this crucial piece of information had clearly decided to make a break from her past. Her profile at rest still somehow looked to be smiling, and it was certain that she was facing forward.

Perhaps that was why Lawrence chose his words carefully, if mischievously. "I thank you for this unexpected compensation."

The girl made an expression of surprise and turned to face him. A charmingly wry smile appeared on her face in turn. "I

said nothing about this being compensation. I fully intend to fulfill my original promise, whatever your doubts."

Her words were compounded by a deliberate sigh of relief, then a laugh.

It was an exchange that Lawrence could have scarcely imagined mere days earlier. She had been utterly single-minded in her search for that place, her ultimate goal. Now that she had found it, her ability to smile the way she did made Lawrence feel as though he were witnessing the very essence of salvation.

"Still, given my state at the moment...," she said, raising her right hand and looking very weak indeed.

Through the hole of her sleeve Lawrence could see the bandages that were wrapped around her torso, and although it was difficult to notice, her cheeks were actually rather sunken.

"So you're saying it will take time?" Lawrence said.

"No," said the girl with a soft smile. "I've asked him to draw you the map in my place. I'm having the necessary materials collected. He's a good artist, so he ought to be able to draw a map from dictation."

"You mean—"

"Yes. He, too, traveled the land with his brushes."

Lawrence had no response, realizing that he had underestimated the man.

This was the home of an art seller, and the topic of their conversation was its master. Lawrence had assumed that the man lacked the courage to take up the brush himself and had settled for collecting the works of others.

But everyone has a past.

"When I said I wanted him to draw the map in my stead, he was terribly enthusiastic about it. Of course"—she said, smiling a mischievous smile—"he may have been enthusiastic only

about my request to be allowed to stay here whilst I earn traveling funds."

The girl was a crafter of silver goods whose quality put them in high demand among the worldly, wealthy, and powerful. Even Lawrence could not guess at how much her works might be worth.

"I'm sure you're in a hurry, so I'll have the map sent to you as soon as it's finished. If I used a messenger on a fast horse, it may well be delivered to you as soon as you arrive in Lenos."

It would take four or five days to reach Lenos by horse-drawn wagon. Not having to wait for the map to be completed would save a significant amount of time.

"Thank you, so much."

She smiled pleasantly upon hearing the depth of his gratitude.

In other circumstances, he would have moved on to pleasant idle chatter, but she was still recovering from her wounds, and though she looked well enough at the moment, he could tell she might push herself too far.

He quietly indicated his intention to leave.

She smiled a tired smile, sighing as she sank back down into the pillow behind her back. So she *had* been pushing herself. It seemed her reputation as the former chaplain of a mercenary band was not just talk.

Lawrence opened the door behind him, stepped through with a respectful bow, and softly closed it.

"You heard her," he said, facing forward as he strode down the hall.

Beside him walked his traveling companion, who'd come up beside him with footfalls as silent as some forest creature.

Her face was terribly sulky, as though she were deeply unamused with something. "Did I, then?"

She hid neither her tone nor her displeasure, but even after he had thought about it for a bit, Lawrence hit upon no obvious

reason for it. Was she merely jealous that he had spent time alone with someone else?

As he was considering the absurd possibility, his traveling companion stopped in her tracks, and without waiting for him to turn around, she spoke. "I still can't manage such a face."

Lawrence was not exactly surprised, but her words still struck him with some force. He backtracked the steps he had walked past her, then stroked her downturned head through her hood.

"Worried your appeal is lessened by the demands you make?"

The *snap* sound that followed was the sound of his hand narrowly avoiding being bitten. Her red-tinged amber eyes glared at him, sharp.

"I am a merchant, and a merchant's customers are never satisfied. If they were, they wouldn't need anything from the merchant. It'd be the end of the business," he countered.

For that reason, Holo had a powerful desire to see Yoitsu. Merchants craved customers with powerful desires, and as such, she was a perfect match for him.

Lawrence withdrew his hand, and she resumed walking sourly along. "Honest?" she said, clinging to his side.

"You'd know whether or not it was a lie, wouldn't you?" he asked tiredly, and her hood rustled unnaturally. Among her strands of hair, out from under the hood peeked tufts of dark fur—her pointed wolf's ears.

"I'll believe you, just this once," she said, haughty.

"Is that so."

"Aye."

Neither could hide their laughter at the silly exchange.

But just as laughing revealed the lines in one's face, there was a shadow behind the conversation.

Lawrence's companion could not imitate Fran's face—her serene expression of having truly left behind all the things that

haunted her. But that lack was also how Lawrence could continue traveling with Holo.

Yet was that only a momentary state of being? Or would it continue on, far into the future?

When Holo's desire was satisfied, Lawrence would have no further cause to stay with her, but nonetheless, he had no wish to see her eternally unfulfilled. If it were in his power to do so, he wished to make her smile.

He knew his was a selfish hope, and he found his own all-too-clear wishes rather sickening.

In any case, it was not the merchant way to give in to hardship. Problems were simply opportunities for a solution.

They descended the stairs and walked down a hallway. "If we were to spice up our traveling rations a bit, what would you like?" Lawrence asked as he put his hand on the door to their room.

He caught a glimpse of the smile he loved so dearly. He felt a little proud of himself for being able to bring it out.

Without guilt or hesitation, his companion made clear her desire for the finest wheat bread and the clearest wine, and he could hardly fault her for it. She had not cut herself free from her past, nor did she likely intend to.

The map he had been discussing only moments before would lead them right to that past. That same map would soon be in their hands, and they might well count on its accuracy. So it was that his companion's tail was puffed pitiably up, in a mix of anticipation and dread.

There was nothing he could do about her tail, so painfully bristled because of his words. Instead, he would try to fill her belly, and perhaps her tail would smooth itself in turn.

Hoping as much, he continued the preparations for their travels, dodging his companion's constant demands as he worked.

CHAPTER ONE



Their old blankets resembled nothing so much as tree bark, so they were replaced with fluffy new ones—likewise overcoats, mufflers, hats, and gloves. Next came the food: Wheat bread topped the list, with salted meat and fish, various vegetables, along with medicinal herbs. And of course wine: the finest grape wine that could be had.

As Hugues busied himself with loading their wagon, he weathered Lawrence's constant thanks with a bulwark of tired laughter.

Five days had passed since the events surrounding Fran, the traveling artist and silversmith. Fran had been badly wounded in all the commotion, and it had been only the previous day that a life-threatening fever brought on by her wounds had finally broken.

The promised map had yet to be drawn, but as soon as Fran regained consciousness and opened her eyes, she had summoned Lawrence to her room to discuss the matter. Hurrying her any further would have been a betrayal of trust.

But that did not mean they could afford to tarry, and at Fran's suggestion, Lawrence and Holo would set out again, rather than waiting for the map to be completed.

With their eyes on Yoitsu, they would return temporarily to Lenos. It would be a convenient place to leave the wagon Lawrence had done so much business with, and more important, it was situated at a convenient entry point into the true northlands.

They ought to have arrived by boat, but unfortunately no such option existed for their return. So it was that Lawrence found himself borrowing a wagon from Hugues. He had thought to carry something to Lenos on Hugues's behalf to offset this favor, but Lawrence seemed to be the only one concerned with such trivialities.

Merchants were largely a duty-bound group, and some of them took this far beyond profit and loss calculations. Hugues seemed to be the epitome of such folk and, despite Lawrence's refusals, loaded one expensive piece of travel supply after another into the wagon. Lawrence did not feel free to suggest that he would pay for the use of the wagon, even as a joke. Holo was overjoyed, but from Lawrence's perspective, the generosity was something of a burden.

All debts had to be repaid, after all.

It was fine while one was borrowing, but thinking about what would come after made him depressed, frankly.

"Whew...well, this ought to do it," said Hugues as he finished loading a sack of unrefined flour into the wagon.

If Lawrence were to simply turn around and sell the gifts off, he could make a lot of money, although to Hugues it was probably no great sum. And in any case, Hugues seemed even happier than the delighted Holo in the wagon bed, so Lawrence made no move to stop him. It was rather amusing to see a sheep spirit like Hugues so busily aiding a wolf like Holo, but it was not as though this was none of Lawrence's business.

Holo immediately found some jerky and leaned back against a rolled-up blanket.

Lawrence said another thank-you, and Hugues shook his head as though it were nothing. Then he drew close to Lawrence's ear and whispered something Lawrence would not forget: "Given the coin value of how much I've made, I feel honestly bad that I'm only giving you this much."

There were no better words he could have spoken to make Lawrence feel better about the mountain of gifts. Hugues was obviously telling the truth, so all Lawrence had to do was happily accept his largesse.

"I thank you," said Lawrence one last time, taking Hugues's hand.

"Regarding the letter Miss Fran requested, when it's finished, I'll have it sent to you on a fast horse." Then it would be delivered to the Beast and Fish Tail, a famous tavern with devotees as far away as Kerube. "Oh, and one more thing," said Hugues, glancing at Holo in the wagon bed.

Holo was idly gnawing away at her jerky as she gazed up at the clear sky and seemed not to be listening to them.

"I'll send *it*, as well."

That was Hugues's long experience as an art seller coming into play. He was deliberately overdoing the gossipy whisper to increase the air of mystery.

Even Col—who busied himself with picking up fallen vegetable leaves and wood chips and covering the wagon bed's contents with a tarp—would find the sentiment rather baffling, to say nothing of Holo. But given her wisewolf's pride, she would hardly venture to ask what they were talking about.

Part of this was that such questions would stir up extra trouble for her, and at the moment, she was also pretending more demure modesty than usual. At the same time, this could be used against her when he actually *did* want to hide something from her.

Hugues had only too readily taken advantage of that.

"We'll be off, then," said Lawrence, after putting Col in the wagon bed and settling himself in the driver's seat.

He urged the horse on, and the familiar clatter of clopping hooves and rattling cartwheels filled the air.

It was the merchant's way to forego lengthy good-byes and drawn-out words of thanks. "Time is money," went the saying, and anyway, it was best to make painful partings as short as possible. It was best to pull the arrow out of the wound quickly, after all.

Hugues's form would soon disappear into the crowds, and no doubt Fran's barely visible hand in the inn's window would likewise vanish. Lawrence heard the sound of the wistful, backward-facing Col sit down rather abruptly.

Once they passed through its walls and emerged from within the town, it, too, would sink into the scenery.

And before them was only the road.

Lawrence slapped the reins across the horses' hindquarters.

They were chilled by the occasional gusts of wind from over the river's surface.

The sky was a leaden gray, and its color, reflected in the river, made both look frozen, only adding to the chill. On top of that, the air was exceedingly dry, and one could practically feel the moisture draining from one's face.

Long ago, Lawrence had thought his master's habit of applying medicinal grease to his face in this season quite strange, but lately when he neglected his own health, flakes of skin soon appeared on his face.

He had been working alone as a merchant for seven years—ever since setting out at the age of eighteen—and perhaps the fatigue was finally catching up with him.

If so, so be it.

The problem was, his companion, who neglected her own health far more than he did, seemed to consider such worries utterly irrelevant to her own lot.

"Of course not, you fool," said his traveling companion Holo as she sat beside him. Her hair fluttered in the wind, brushing the corner of his eye and making it itch most unpleasantly. When he looked over at her profile, those were the words that greeted him. "You humans show your feelings on your face. We wolves show them with our fur. That I must curl my tail about Col every night lest he cry from the cold only makes it more so," she said with a displeased sigh, all the while tidying the fur before her.

It was no sash or wrap, but entirely her own: the fur of her tail.

Holo looked to be a girl in her teens, but her true form was that of a giant wolf, big enough to devour Lawrence in a single bite. A wolf who dwelled in the wheat and guaranteed its bountiful harvest.

As such, whenever she pulled back the hood over her head, two proudly pointed wolf ears appeared.

Although at first he had been unable to conceal his considerable fear of her, now it was not so. Though she was someone he would do well to never underestimate, she was nonetheless irreplaceable, his most treasured traveling companion.

"Is that so? It's so lovely that one such as I would never notice a flaw in it, so..."

His obvious flattery was delivered in a deadpan monotone, which earned him a stomp on his foot. But her tail still puffed up happily, which was why he had to resort to such childish tactics.

At length, they both sighed at the foolishness to which they had each sunk. The only reason they had resorted to repeating such

familiar patterns was that there in the wagon, there was nothing else to do.

"Is there nothing amusing we might play at?" There was not, of course, which was why Holo normally busied herself with either tail grooming or napping, curled up, in the wagon bed.

Lawrence thought about it for a moment, then replied. "There certainly are quite a few boats heading downriver," he said, pointing at the river. Holo, resting her chin in her hands and her elbows on Lawrence's lap, looked listlessly to the river, then back up at Lawrence.

"When so many boats head downriver, you would think the number of boats left upriver decreases, and the waters downriver would be crowded. But it's not so—why do you suppose that is?"

Lawrence heard Holo murmur a small "Huh?"

Holo called herself wisewolf and took pride in the quickness of her wits. At Lawrence's question, she looked again at the river, then at Lawrence.

"Why do you suppose that is?" he asked again, looking at Holo out of the corner of one eye, squinted against the cold, whereupon Holo drew in her chin in consternation. "Hmmmm...," she moaned thoughtfully.

It was the sort of teasing a bored master would often inflict on his apprentice.

For such teasing to succeed, it was necessary for the mark to have confidence in their own intelligence. Then you would simply ask them an obvious question.

If ships only traveled downstream, then there would soon be no ships upriver, while downriver the waters would be jammed with ships.

Which meant there could only be one answer.

"I-I know," said Holo.

"Oh?" replied Lawrence, facing forward. He gave the horse a

flick of the reins to stop it from grazing on some grass, as though inviting Holo to give him her answer.

"A ship heading downriver is the same as a load of lumber, is it not?"

"Meaning?"

"Mm. Meaning that when the ships reach the sea, they're either broken up for lumber, or they continue on across the ocean. Coming from upriver, they satisfy a demand both for ships and for lumber itself, as well as transporting other goods. Three birds with one stone."

It was a reasonable answer. When she had begun speaking, Holo's face had been uncertain, but by the time she arrived at the end of her argument, her face was quite proud, as if to say, "How about that, eh?"

Lawrence disguised his laugher with a cough. "Not even close," he said. "The answer is that the ships are pulled back upriver. They go and come back. Obvious, isn't it?"

Upon hearing this, Holo wore an expression like that of a tricked puppy.

"The point is, the most complicated answer isn't always the right one," said Lawrence, poking the betrayed-looking Holo between her eyebrows. His hands were covered by thick deerskin gloves he had received from Hugues, so he had nothing to fear.

Holo slapped his hand away and bared her sharp fangs.

Lawrence laughed, at which she turned away peevishly, with not a shred of the majesty befitting a wisewolf.

"Of course, depending on the season, sometimes what you suggested does happen. But in that case, it's usually a raft. And the riverbank here, see how it's so free of reeds and such? Since there's so much shipping traffic, and they have to pull all those ships back upriver, the banks are kept clear to make it easy for horses to pull the ropes attached to the ships."

Because of the heavy shipping traffic, when ships were hauled back upriver, downriver traffic was limited and largely tied up. Given that, at the moment, no ships were visible either up- or downriver, it was likely that they would not encounter one at all during this particular journey.

If they ran into a ship being taken back upriver by a hauling party, they might have had a grand time—the hauling parties were loud and boisterous affairs.

Lawrence explained this, at which Holo heaved a great sigh. "'Tis a pity, then, such a pity!" she grumbled. If half of her grumbling was from frustration at having been fooled by Lawrence, the other half was out of genuine disappointment—from their earlier travels down this very river, she had personal experience of just how hearty its travelers could be. "As we've so much fine wine, and all..."

Lawrence laughed unhesitatingly at this murmur, and Holo, too, giggled mischievously. But the sound of their laughter soon disappeared into the wind that blew across the river.

This trouble that had started their journey together had been only a few months earlier, but already it felt like the distant past.

Time had passed quickly—and it could not be wound back.

A smile continued to play across Holo's lips, and she looked quietly toward the river.

If nothing was eternal, there was no point in making a dour expression. Lawrence knew that, and yet could not help himself.

Lawrence attempted to put his arm around Holo, but it was nothing less than Holo's own hand that stopped him.

"Mm. I suppose 'twould not be so bad to nestle myself in your bosom now, but..." Taking hold of the index finger of his gloved hand, she placed it back on his lap. It was not as though she was chiding a light-fingered urchin, but her face was still

rather serious. "I'm worried about *that*," said Holo, bringing her face near to Lawrence's shoulder and lightly inclining her chin toward the wagon bed.

Lawrence was not so naive as to believe that Holo had suddenly wanted to be close to him so badly that she had decided to do her tail grooming in the driver's seat next to him, as opposed to her normal spot in the wagon bed.

He knew the boy was of an essentially mild nature, and that given his druthers would prefer sitting happily next to someone rather than keeping to himself in deep contemplation. But ever since their stay in Kerube, he seemed to have something quietly on his mind.

"He hasn't said anything to you, either, then?"

"Nay. I know it started when he talked to that fool girl." Holo seemed more dissatisfied than worried.

"That fool girl" surely referred to Fran, and if she had had some kind of effect on Col, that had to be the answer. The walls of Hugues's shop and home were not so thick as to prevent Holo's sharp ears from listening in on any secret conversations that happened within them.

If she had only listened carefully, she would have been able to hear what they had said, Lawrence was about to point out, when Holo pinched his thigh. "I'm Holo, a proud wisewolf. Don't mistake me for some gossipy little bint."

"Fine, fine, all right! Sorry."

Holo squinted at Lawrence, then finally let go of his thigh. Still, when she looked ahead, her lips thin and sharp, she could not help but spit out her weakness. "Can he not rely upon me, then?"

Lawrence know Holo well enough to know when she was joking. It was her amber eyes, more than anything else, that reflected

her heart. Usually red tinged with the force of her triumphant pride, when downcast, they looked like brittle honey candy about to break.

Holo had suffered the despair of being unneeded by anyone for centuries. No doubt their exchange after speaking with Fran about the map was also contributing to this.

Lawrence looked back into the wagon bed and replied with a light tone, "Meeting the right person can change you. Or would you prefer he stay a boy forever?"

Even a chick sleeping beneath its mother's wing would one day have to fly on its own. Much less Col, who had left his village with such great determination. He knew the smell of dust and dirt too well to let Holo fuss over him forever. And Lawrence was well aware that Holo was not so self-centered as to actually begrudge Col his maturity.

Still looking ahead, Holo sighed a long, quiet exhalation. Then, as her face passed through the white fog of her breath, she tilted her head in irritation and glared back at Lawrence resentfully. "That's why I've kept quiet, isn't it?"

Lawrence did not shrink away. Instead, he let it pass lightly by, replying with deliberate politeness. "Oh, indeed."

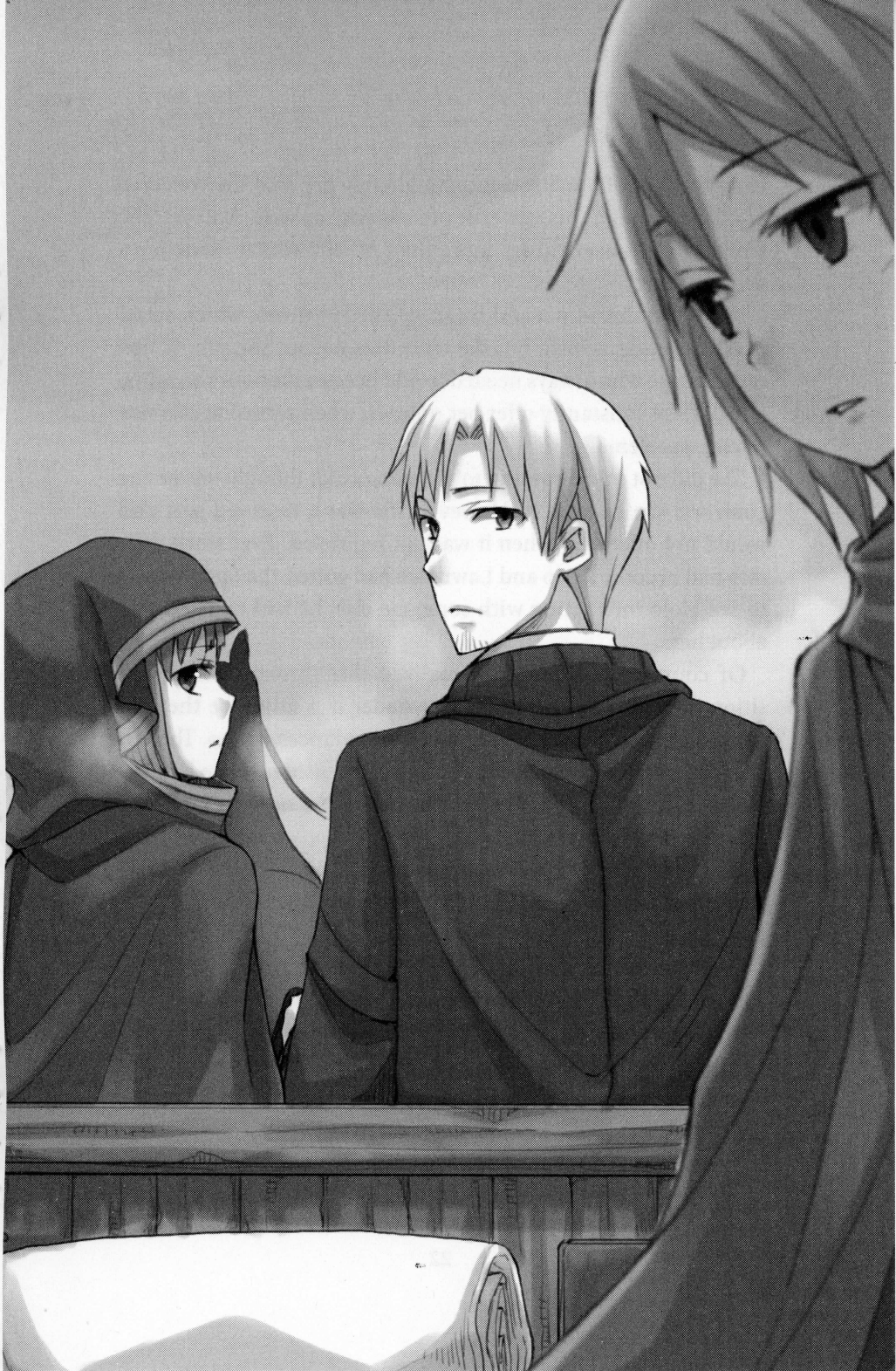
Holo punched Lawrence's thigh with a balled-up fist. But instead of bringing her hand back up, she left it there, resting on his leg. "But I'm no god."

She spoke the words sullenly, her eyes upturned in far too human a manner to be thought of as a deity of any holiness or special sanctity.

Of course, merchants preferred their wine a little muddied.

Lawrence took Holo's hand. "Oh, indeed," he repeated.

This time, though, Holo was not angry at all. She leaned her head on his shoulder.



* * *

Holo was not of the disposition to forcibly pry into the concerns of others, though this was true of Lawrence as well. And yet, she tended to fret over things more than others, which made for a delicate atmosphere.

She was quick of wit and mean-spirited at times, which could make her seem selfish. But the truth was not so: She simply was not the type who always needed to add her unasked-for thoughts, nor did she constantly offer her opinion when someone else was having problems.

She did not mind coming to someone's aid, though—quite the contrary, she enjoyed it. However, she was a reserved sort and would not offer help when it was not requested. Ever since their duo had become a trio and Lawrence had gotten the opportunity to see Holo interacting with someone else, he had realized that about her.

Of course, once Lawrence realized this through her disposition toward Col, and began to wonder if it might be the case toward himself as well, there was an abundance of clues. Though she had so often bullied him for being insensitive, once he realized the truth of the matter, he concluded that he truly *had* been insensitive.

It was not exactly out of penance for this, but nonetheless Lawrence had taken to serving Holo slightly more generous portions at mealtime.

Holo, of course, noticed the deliberately larger servings and made a sour face as though to say, "You needn't bother."

Thus, their travels had proceeded a bit more awkwardly and silently than usual, only regaining their liveliness once they encountered a group of fishermen pulling fish up onto the riverbank.

"There, *pull*!" To the rhythmic booming of a drum they pulled,

many men hauling a great net that had been spread out over the river. There were also men facing the net, beating the surface of the water with sticks, and men in traveling clothes similar to Lawrence's party, bent over and looking down at the catch on the riverbank.

As the river belonged to the local landlord, one could not simply take fish from it as one pleased. Among the fishermen here were more than a few soldiers armed with short spears, grim faced and carrying some sort of parchment, counting the fishes that had been caught in the nets and brought ashore. The fish were then tossed into barrels and buckets that had been readied in wagon beds. Said barrels and buckets were then marked with lime chalk, and once they were full, the wagons rolled off.

Given that the river was so heavily trafficked, they had probably chosen this place to fish because it was far removed from any towns. Lawrence looked upstream and saw a checkpoint, and it seemed that ships were being stopped to let the fishing continue.

The net became heavier as it was dragged, and both the beat of the drum and the shouts of the men grew louder in response. Lawrence glanced back into his own wagon bed and saw that Col and Holo both had stood and were watching the fishing with intense interest, their fists clenched.

With one last, great cry from the men, the net, twitching as though filled with huge catfish, was finally hauled ashore. The fish seemed large, despite the cold season. Perhaps the marine life did not have to worry much about food, given what food fell overboard from all the passing ships.

There was a loud shout of triumph, and the net haulers all swarmed around the catch.

In addition to the noise of the fishermen all vying to be the first, the officials' angry shouts and the onlookers' cries of delight were intermixed—it was a great commotion. There was the thrashing

about of the fish, too, and the sound of them being tossed into the waiting barrels, and then the sound of the filled wagons pulling away. It was a pleasant, comforting tumult.

After so long on the constantly cold landscape seemingly devoid of any living thing, this was the first obvious sign of life and liveliness they had seen in some time.

Perhaps that was why everyone watching seemed so pleased, even relieved.

As the last wagon pulled away, spontaneous applause broke out, and even Holo and Col began to clap happily, despite not exactly understanding.

Lawrence plucked a scrap of jerky from the wagon bed and regarded the pair. "Hey, you two. You'd best make ready."

"Mm? Make ready?" Holo and Col alike looked down at him.

"I declare this fishing expedition concluded! By the charity of Lord Osborne, the remaining fish shall be given to the people!" announced one of the officials in a loud voice, his spear tip raised high.

At this, those who had been sitting here and there around the edge of the riverbank, gazing at the fish, sprung to their feet, as if they had been waiting for this moment. When they reached the river, there were many fish still opening and closing their mouths.

The region's landlord must have concluded that sparing the people a small share of fish would prevent them from trying to poach from the river. Presented with such readily available stock, even a group of travelers on pilgrimage would snatch them up all too happily.

Men and women alike hitched up the hems of their robes, cast off their overcoats, and gathered up great armfuls of fish. Holo and Col looked at each other, then immediately kicked their shoes off and sprinted barefoot toward the riverbank. Holo seemed not even to care that her tail was briefly visible.

Lawrence watched the pair with a happily exasperated expression on his face, then plucked a tendon free from his jerky. He tossed the inedible bit aside before joining a group around a bonfire to get some warmth.

That evening dinner came early, with the freshly caught fish covered in salt and roasted over the fire. Holo and Col devoured fish as though they were competing to see who could feast the best. It was not very mannerly, but in that moment, it was a joyous meal nonetheless.

Once he visited a town on his trade route, Lawrence would generally not see it again for a year. That had been his life, and he had largely expected it to continue that way.

So it was strange to not only see Kerube again, but also now Lenos, after not so very great a span of time had passed.

"Though you're not so angry this time," said Lawrence, tucking the letter of introduction he had received from Hugues into his breast pocket.

Given the luxurious goods in the wagon bed, passing legitimately through the town gates would have involved paying a hefty tax, but Hugues had not failed to take that into account. He had dropped the name of a lord he was close with, and in the letter asked for the taxation amount to be adjusted.

Perhaps because the goods he dealt with were of such high value, Hugues seemed to wield significant influence. Once the letter was recognized as genuine, the officials at the gate quickly turned polite.

However, just as Lawrence expected to be sent on his way, they insisted rather formidably on conducting a thorough inspection of the goods he was carrying.

Thus it was that Holo's tail had been once again referred to as "a cheap fur" by an inspector.

"I can't go getting angry at every little slight. And anyway, fatigue has made my tail most unkempt, so I've no leg to stand on, really." She yawned hugely, then sighed. Perhaps she had decided that being quick to anger was beneath her dignity as a wisewolf, or perhaps she truly was fatigued—either way, Holo slumped in the driver's seat. The only one among them with any energy was Col, for whom this visit to the town of Lenos was his first.

Of course, in Holo's case, her fatigue was likely less physical than it was mental. The sudden opportunity to participate in the fish-taking had gotten her strangely excited, and thereafter she had gotten out of the wagon bed many times, choosing instead to walk. Lawrence half joked that she might as well transform into her true form and enjoy her walk that way, but the serious, considering look on her face stopped him short.

She might have been trying to make Col laugh, but another part of that look was surely genuine.

Lawrence knew she would be angry if he pointed this out, so he pretended not to notice, though in the cloudless night, sometimes Holo arched her back as though she ached to howl.

It would not have been strange at all for her to want to howl with all her might, once in a while, and run until her legs would no longer carry her.

"When we arrive at the inn, I'll have the innkeeper make ready hot water and towels. You'll feel better after washing the dust off."

"And fine oil, too."

She had learned some time ago that oil was good for combing out her tail, but it was not until trying it at Hugues's place that she had gotten the taste for it.

She would not have asked for something he would outright refuse. He only put up mild resistance in the form of a sour expression and the words "if there's time to buy it."

Yet that was enough to improve her spirits, so perhaps it was a small price to pay.

"So, then, how long will we be staying, eh?" asked Holo, curled up and resting her cheek on her knees. She was not facing him when she asked, and her tone sounded uninterested, but Lawrence knew she was in fact very concerned about the issue.

Lawrence considered it for a few moments and decided on an optimistic answer. "I'd say three or four days at the longest. We're just getting information. We've already got cold-weather gear, and we'll only need to buy a little extra food."

"Mm." Holo sighed, as though satisfied to hear that much, but beneath her hood, her ears still twitched busily.

Lawrence cleared his throat and continued, "We don't know which route we'll be taking, though. So long as it has a bit of traffic, a snowpack route will be fine. Otherwise, we'll need to find a good road. The former will take us to the Debau Company—the latter, to Nyohhira."

Nyohhira was a name likely to make Holo uneasy, but it was one of a very few place-names that she remembered. Holo stubbornly continued to look away, but she could not hide her nostalgia. If prodded, she might well have started weeping, which brought Lawrence to smile fondly.

"Col—do you know the town of Nyohhira?"

Lawrence turned the conversation to Col, afraid of what might happen if Holo noticed him smiling at her.

Col seemed initially taken aback at being so suddenly drawn into the conversation but then nodded. "The name only."

"It's an old town, with hot springs that gush up out of the ground. I've passed through it once—it was a curious place."

"Curious?"

"Yes. Despite being so far out in a foreign land, it's said that the

highest-ranking clergy from all over the world gather there. And in hundreds of years, there's never once been a battle there."

Col, being from a town that had suffered the unreasonable persecution of the Church, all in the name of God, seemed to find this nearly unbelievable. He really was a good conversation partner, given how charmingly he showed his surprise.

"That's why so many people, suffering from the pain of this always-fighting world of ours, seem to think they're hiding the secret to eternal peace there." As Lawrence spoke, he lightly rested his elbow on the head of the still-turned-away Holo.

"But there's no way the world is ever going to stop fighting, is there...?"

"That's true. A good soak in hot water can cure all sorts of sickness and injury, so everyone forgets about their troubled hearts. That's not going to stop the world from fighting."

Under Lawrence's elbow, Holo turned her head and, after giving the sadly smiling Col a little grin, spoke up in a bored tone of voice. "I soaked in that water myself long ago, and now I remember how much I fought to cool off after it."

Lawrence knew he did not need to worry whether he had pushed things too far. He gave Holo's head a brisk rub, then pulled on the reins to avoid a dog.

"The shopkeeper Miss Fran told us about is a former mercenary, she said. Hopefully he's had a nice soak and is feeling large of heart when we arrive."

"I'm rather hoping for a large inn," said Holo. Whether or not their stay in the town was enjoyable rested on the quality of the accommodations.

Col was kneeling in the wagon bed—which was dangerous, so Lawrence had him sit. "I doubt old Arold's place is still in business. Hard to know whether we'll find a good inn or not."

"The place where I was held in hock was splendid," said Holo spitefully, her eyes narrowed.

Lawrence did not think she was actually angry, but he could not very well point that out. He did not ever want to use Holo as collateral again. "Well, we'll ask around town."

"Do you know anyone there?" Holo's eyes made it very clear that she had no intention of returning to the angry folk of the Delink Company. No matter how favorably one might try to look at the men who had held Holo hostage, they were not a pleasant lot. They wriggled like leeches, made webs like spiders, and pretended at nobility—all the hateful things in the world condensed into human form.

And yet it was thanks to their like that the world kept turning, and Lawrence had profited through them. If possible, he did not want to get involved with them again—and yet it made him a bit wistful to imagine how much of his life might elapse before he was involved in another deal of that size again.

Lawrence smiled to himself as such thoughts crossed his mind, then scratched his nose. "I have some other acquaintances, yes. I'll need to contact someone to receive the map, and I'll ask them if they can recommend an inn."

Though it was only a few weeks earlier that the hide tanners and all related merchants had been driven from Lenos, it seemed just as busy as ever. Perhaps the trouble with the furs truly had been a mere tempest in a teacup.

Lawrence pulled at the reins, steering the wagon hither and thither through the busy streets.

It was only when they passed a street filled with what seemed to be butchers' shops—with rows of baskets tightly packed with chickens—that Holo spoke. "So you have some acquaintances, do you?"

"Yes, at a place called the Beast and Fish Tail."

"Mm? Oh, the shop where they had that peculiar rodent dish."

Lawrence seemed to remember Holo liking the food there. If they dined at the place, they could kill three birds with one stone.

Once they finished passing by the street, raucous with the crying of the hens, Lawrence took up the reins and was about to give the horse's hindquarters a snap. And just in that moment, Holo spoke.

"You've certainly got some nerve."

"Huh?"

What did nerve have to do with treating Holo to the famous cooking of the Beast and Fish Tail?

Merchants could recall most things they had seen. Lawrence flipped back through his memory, and it stopped at the image of a certain woman. There was a famous and capable shopgirl who worked at the Beast and Fish Tail.

"Ah." As Lawrence was trying to decide whether or not to bother to groan, Holo interrupted.

"Ah well, I'll soak myself thoroughly in the hot springs of Nyohhira, and forget my angered heart, won't I?"

The look in Holo's eyes at that moment was very far indeed from forgetting any sort of anger at all. She looked almost excited at the prospect of chasing off any sense of ease Lawrence might have felt. Behind them, Col craned his neck around, confused, but Lawrence could not very well suggest they not go—not anymore, at least.

Lawrence was thoroughly distracted until a craftsman of some kind shouted angrily at him, at which Lawrence hastened to bring his attention back to the street in front of him.

Exhausted, he looked up, while beside him Holo smiled triumphantly.

In this particular city, anytime one looked up, the church spire was plainly visible. Lawrence regarded it and silently prayed that nothing more would go wrong.

It is generally once the sun sets that a tavern becomes truly busy. This was all the more true when the establishment had a respectable clientele, as the Beast and Fish Tail surely did. So when Lawrence and his charges arrived there, it was nearly empty.

However, it was not quiet. Rather, they seemed to be in the midst of preparing for dinner. Right in the center of the tavern were several buckets, each filled to overflowing with shells.

"Hello, there!" said Lawrence by way of greeting as he walked through the open doors, at which the shopgirl turned and squinted, her eyes evidently not adjusted to the bright daylight.

"Hm? Oh, you're the merchant from before."

"Yes, and my thanks." Col had been left to mind the wagon bed, and Holo was at Lawrence's side.

Inwardly, Lawrence prayed that nobody would do anything unnecessary—neither the shopgirl nor Holo. At the very least, neither of them seemed visibly inclined to do so.

But Lawrence was a merchant. He was well aware that each was carefully appraising the other. If it had been a simple battle of wills with him as the prize, he would have been flattered, but he understood things well enough to know that was not the case here.

They were like hunters, each readying their bows for a contest. And as the target at which they would be shooting, Lawrence was disinclined to simply stand there.

"So, what profit are you chasing this time?" said the barmaid as she took clams from the bucket on her right, shucked their innards into the center bucket, then discarded the shell into the leftmost one. Her skill was considerable, and she had a good tool.

Her knife's grip was a simple wrapping of cloth, and the keen blade sparkled like water. With the knife in one hand, her movements were quick and efficient, without apparent effort or wasted motion—it gave the girl a very imposing mien.

"No, no, nothing like that. I've had my fill of chasing profit," said Lawrence with a pained smile, at which the barmaid laughed lightly.

"I wonder how many merchants I've heard say the same thing."

Given that the tavern was the sort of place merchants flocked to for information whenever the situation changed in town, the barmaid had certainly seen the dejected faces of those same merchants after the fact.

"You may be right."

The girl giggled. "A merchant's heart is fickle. As are their excuses—I couldn't help myself. I'm through. I was out of my right mind."

Though the girl's eyes were on Lawrence, it was entirely obvious that her attention was directed toward Holo.

Lawrence shivered, but beside him the wolf smiled happily.

"'Tis true, is it not?" said Holo, looking up at Lawrence, and her grin was by no means a false one.

She was a wisewolf—simply because someone else was spoiling for a fight did not mean she would rise to such bait.

Lawrence felt great relief, and then—

"I've seen the whole thing, all the way up to the sad tears and the swearing to go back to only good, honest business. Honestly, they're a pack of fools, merchants are." Holo quickly reached up and fixed Lawrence's collar.

Both she and the barmaid smiled amused smiles.

Lawrence swallowed and attempted to escape the dilemma into which he had been cornered. "T-true enough, true enough.



I've come here today because I wish to ask about something, that's all."

"And what might that be?" the barmaid replied after a short pause, during which she very clearly met Holo's eyes.

Lawrence was glad he had left Col behind. Anyone else watching this exchange would conclude he was the most foolish man alive.

"It's about the furs...Ah—!"

As he was speaking—and perhaps to purposely fluster him—one of the shell meats fell apart in her hands, and just when Lawrence thought she was going to discard it, she popped it raw into her mouth and gulped it down. Then she reached behind her, grabbed a small cask, and drank from it to wash the bite down.

Given the way she drank, the cask's contents seemed to be strong liquor indeed.

"Whew. Well, if that's what you're after, it's far too late now, eh?"

Even allowing for her actions in that moment to be entirely purposeful, she seemed quite used to drinking casually on the job. No doubt her lack of pretense on that count was part of her peculiar charm.

At the very least, the combination of shellfish and wine would make Holo properly envious.

It suddenly occurred to Lawrence that the two girls might be surprisingly compatible.

"No, nothing like that—it seems we'll be staying in this town again for a while, so I was hoping you could recommend a good inn."

"Oh, my," said the barmaid, pouting like a small child. "How rude to ask me such a thing!"

"..." Lawrence did not at all understand what the girl was getting at, and finally Holo poked him a few times as she spoke up.

"'Tis a joke, that obviously the best place to stay would be hers."

"Huh? O-oh!" Lawrence finally understood the jest, whereupon his breath caught in his throat. For her to make that joke, and for Holo to then have to explain it to him—

Lawrence could look at the market values of *lumione* gold pieces, *trenni* silver pieces, and *lute* silver pieces, or between wheat and iron and herring, and tease out a profit. But he had absolutely no idea how to negotiate the situation he now found himself in.

After all, Fran's map would be arriving here via Hugues. There was no telling what trouble he would bring upon himself if he damaged the mood. And the barmaid was an extremely valuable source of information, which he had no desire to lose.

And yet—if he directed all his attention to the barmaid, he would have Holo's fangs to fear later.

Bringing Holo in here at all had been a terrible mistake.

Oh, God! Lawrence was in agony, and on the verge of surrender, when—

"Pfft!" Holo was the first to laugh. *"Pffha-ha-ha-ha!"* She laughed and laughed, looking piteously upon Lawrence, yet seemingly unable to restrain herself.

Lawrence had no notion of what was so funny. The barmaid, shell in hand, hid her mouth behind her wrist as her shoulders shook with mirth.

"...? —?"

It was not at all uncommon for traveling merchants to go places where they did not speak the language. In such occasions, the most important thing was not to engage the services of an interpreter, nor to be constantly on guard for danger, nor to carry plenty of ransom money.

The most important thing was to never forget to smile.

A smile was the greatest weapon, the greatest shield; it was the most powerful protection one could have.

Lawrence joined the two in their laughter, though he did not understand it one bit.

Unable to resist, the barmaid finally rolled her head back, eyes looking up at the ceiling as she snickered.

The three laughed together for a while, but finally Holo used a corner of Lawrence's clothing to wipe the tears from her eyes, and she directed her gaze lightly toward the barmaid.

"Ha-ha-ha...Ah, but we shouldn't tease him too much."

The girl wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and took another swallow of the none-too-weak wine. She took a breath and nodded. "Yes, quite right. No wonder he seems so invulnerable—he's oblivious! Oh, goodness, but that was fun," she said, and with a flick of her knife, she sent more shell meat into the bucket.

She tossed the large shell onto the pile, wiped the knife clean on her apron, and stood from her chair.

"Food is best with salt, but salt alone is a distasteful thing. I've been foolish."

"Mm. Still, I must compliment your eye, for noticing how magnificent the cooking in question might be."

The barmaid's shoulders slumped in capitulation, and the knife blade she pointed in Lawrence's direction waggled lightly. "If it's an inn you need, I recommend Sister Eunice's place on nunnery row. If you tell her my shop sent you there, you'll not be treated poorly."

Next to a smile on the list of things a traveling merchant could not forget was proper thanks. Even if he did not understand why, showing proper gratitude could settle most situations.

"Ah, you have my thanks."

"Was that all you needed? If you need food, I'll make it and have it sent to Eunice's."

Lawrence looked to Holo for her decision—whereupon both girls again laughed simultaneously.

"Fine, fine, I can see you'd rather eat in a quiet room than here.

I'll have it sent over," said the barmaid, raising both hands up to shoulder level, as though *she* were the one capitulating.

Still, Holo stepped lightly on Lawrence's foot, as though she were truly a bit exasperated. For Lawrence's part, he felt that trying to understand whatever it was these two girls were talking about was the more impossible request.

"It will take a bit of time, but it should arrive by sunset. Shall the house choose the menu, then?"

"Ah, er, yes, please. Also, there's another in our party outside. So a meal for three, then."

"Another?" asked the barmaid curiously, at which Lawrence was finally able to smile a genuine smile. "Unfortunately, he's not a girl. It's a boy we picked up in our travels."

"My goodness. Perhaps I should go after him instead." The barmaid put the sharp knife to her cheek thoughtfully, as though considering the notion.

If Col were taken in by such a woman he would be eaten alive, Lawrence was quite certain. And if Lawrence felt as much, Holo seemed even more convinced. She glared at the barmaid with undisguised suspicion.

"Fine, fine!" said the girl with an exaggerated tone and began to untie her dirty apron.

Lawrence could not help but heave an exhausted sigh, but then realized he had neglected to mention the most important part of this visit. "Oh, that's right."

"Yes?" said the girl, still bent over.

"There should be a letter for me from Kerube arriving here soon, and it will be addressed to this tavern, so..."

"Oh, certainly. Understood. Kerube, you say? Who could it be, I wonder."

"It will be from the Hugues company, which deals in fine arts."

At Lawrence's words, the girl replied with a short "Ah," then

folded her apron up and placed it on the table. "That piggish-looking fellow, eh? He sometimes visits for a meal—he goes on and on about how the sin of gluttony doesn't apply to the Fish Tail and eats a great mountain of food."

Lawrence noticed Holo snicker beside him, and he imagined that she was guessing at the reason for Hugues's portly appearance. *You're not so very different from him*, he thought to himself.

"But if it's all the same..."

"Huh?" Lawrence replied, looking to the barmaid as she hefted the pail of shell meat.

The barmaid began to walk toward the kitchen but stopped and looked back over her shoulder. "If it's all the same, you'd rather receive a different sort of letter, wouldn't you?"

Was the faintly lonely smile on her face a fake one? The thought crossed Lawrence's mind for a moment, but then he realized what the girl was getting at and answered. "Letters tend to be sent from distant places, so will that be all right?"

"Hm?" replied the barmaid, confused.

Holo, too, seemed not to understand. She was looking up at Lawrence from beside him.

"If you wouldn't mind me sending such a letter from a far-off land, I'd be happy to write and say that I long to eat the food here while it's still hot."

The girl raised her chin and curled one corner of her lips up in a half smile. "I don't much like the idea of going far away to serve just one person. Better to stay here, where I can serve many."

With rumors of countless love affairs.

Were it not for Holo, Lawrence might well have been taken in by her himself.

He watched the girl disappear into the kitchen and chided himself for thinking it.

But when their business was complete and they turned toward

the wagon, Holo looked squarely at Lawrence. "If I'd not dug you up, you'd've spent your whole life in the ground," she said.

A gem was only a gem once it was pulled out of the earth. *Don't imagine you'd remain a gem if you leave the gem cutter who found you*, she was surely saying.

Lawrence sighed. "Quite so, my lady," he said and respectfully took Holo's hand. He thanked God for the good fortune he had had to make it out of the tavern alive.

Nothing aroused the appetite like the smell of thinly sliced garlic, coated generously in oil and tossed in salt.

Lawrence was disappointed in himself for going through the wine so quickly, and despite his best efforts collapsed into drunken sleep even before Holo did.

He had vague memories of, while being helped to his feet by Col, looking past the boy and finding Holo grinning triumphantly—as though she were enjoying his pathetic state as a side dish to her own drinking. But he had no idea how much of that was reality.

He raised his head, which felt as heavy as though it were packed with sand. Sitting upright, the first thing he was sure of was that the sun had long since risen and his body reeked of alcohol.

Also, that Holo and Col were nowhere to be seen.

He gave his head a vigorous shake, which gave him a glimpse of hell. With his hand he gently rubbed his head, then slowly stood up. It seemed the iron pitcher on the table had been refilled with fresh water, cold enough to have condensation on it.

Lawrence took a careful drink, then looked around the room.

There were no overcoats or robes to be found, so he presumed his companions had gone out somewhere.

In a sudden panic he searched the table for his coin purse, but as far as he could tell, the number of silver pieces it contained was unchanged.

"Where did they go?" He cocked his head and yawned, then opened the window's wooden shutters, which let the painfully bright morning sunlight come stabbing into the room.

He narrowed his eyes for a time, then looked down onto the back alley, where he saw a woman balancing a basket on her head as she ambled down the way. A young boy with a sack wrapped around himself ran alongside her.

It was a completely ordinary day in the city.

He sighed again, intent on checking the state of his beard, when something white caught his eye.

He looked and saw two familiar forms making their way along the narrow path that wound up the hill.

"To the church?" Lawrence asked as he looked down at the reflection of his face. The water was held in a bucket, which sat at the edge of the well.

Also sitting on the well curb was Holo, who nodded. "Aye. My nose was finding the scent of garlic and wine in the room rather tiresome, you see. The lad was begging me, so we went to 'morning prayers' or whatever they're called."

She was complaining incessantly about the smell, but in truth Lawrence could smell it himself and could thus hardly refute her. He lightly rinsed his knife in the bucket, then put its blade to his cheek. "Was it well attended?"

"Aye. It seemed they might not let us in at all, but one look at Col and I and they relented."

With a traveling nun on one hand, and wandering boy on the other, even the hardest-headed church guard would find himself moved to sympathy, no doubt.

But given that Col was only studying Church law in order to better use the Church, why would he want to attend the morning

prayers? Of course, there were many who believed quite seriously in the existence of three or four gods and that so long as there was something to be gained via just one of them that was enough devotion. And while Col's plan was to use the Church for his own purposes, it would hardly be strange if, in the course of studying its law, he had become a believer himself. Or perhaps it was simply that the serene aura within the sanctuary was to the liking of a quiet boy like Col?

"Still, you must be in fine spirits, to venture so boldly into enemy territory."

Holo dangled her feet over the well's edge like a little girl. And even if she had not, a glance at her profile made her good mood altogether obvious.

"Aye. Col was so delighted, you see. Though my smile was a wry one, we went to the church, and I felt refreshed." She grinned, somewhat abashed, and Lawrence, too, had to smile.

"How very like you, to share him like that."

Holo heard Lawrence's words as though they were a faint song carried to her on the wind.

As far as her relationship with the Church went, Holo's face ought to have been complicated, as though it were a difficult matter to explain with mere words. But her expression was clear, and she spoke with a note of pride in her voice. "Unlike you, I am well aware of what is important in life."

Lawrence answered as he checked the sharpness of his blade with his hand. "Meaning?"

"Meaning Col's happy face is more important to me than more trivial manners."

Lawrence followed the image of Holo's face as it was reflected in the knife blade, then carefully put it to his jaw. "So, when he begged you to come with him, you were even happier, you mean?"

He had meant it to tease, but Holo ducked her head and chuckled. She was making it quite clear to Lawrence what made her happy and what she disliked.

"So the notion that he just ought to have been more honest from the beginning is just a foolish wandering merchant's simpleminded thinking, then?"

Holo had constantly worried, as they traveled in the wagon bed, about Col's reluctance to ask about the things that were bothering him. As Lawrence shaved his beard after laying the problem bare, Holo hopped down from the well curb and made some rustling noises.

Lawrence straightened, but there was no need to look.

Holo took a step or two, then sat again such that she was back-to-back with Lawrence. "Am I not a wisewolf in the end? I've my dignity to think of."

Lawrence smiled, because the ticklish amusement in her voice was communicated via the place where their backs touched. "It must be difficult," he said.

Holo's tail swished. "'Tis difficult indeed."

It was not clear how serious she was, but at the very least, she did not seem to be doing things on principle just because she was a wisewolf. Being clear about one's feelings and thoughts was a source of great comfort, especially for merchants.

Perhaps Holo was thinking the same thing.

Completely out of his field of vision, her presence only clear via her body heat at his back, Holo continued. "Would you be angry if I said I was excited to go to Yoitsu?"

Their arrival at Yoitsu would mean nothing less than the end of their journey. But Lawrence only smiled ruefully. "I would not. I myself would like to play at being a wise man, after all."

Somehow, Lawrence could tell that she smiled.

She said nothing after that, so Lawrence resumed his shaving.

Still silent, Holo got to her feet behind Lawrence. When he had finished shaving, the man checked his face in the bucket's reflection again, then scattered the water onto the plants in the courtyard. Like a butterfly flapping away after being disturbed by a human, Holo moved away from behind Lawrence.

Lawrence returned the knife to his side, and as he rubbed his cheeks, Holo wordlessly drew alongside him.

She seemed to want to hold hands.

Lawrence smiled and reached indulgently for her small one. It was just then that Col passed by the open door that faced the courtyard.

"Hn!" Holo grunted, for Col held a shallow bowl in both hands. The Beast and Fish Tail's name seemed mighty indeed, and the innkeeper had prepared a hot breakfast for the travelers. Holo ran off as though she had been waiting for this all along, and Lawrence was left to keep his own company.

The hand he had reached out to grasp hers closed, pathetically, on empty air.

"..."

To return the grasp of an extended hand was to seal a contract between merchants. He thought about explaining this at length, but looking at the happily trotting Holo as she followed Col, he thought better of it.

Quietly, quietly, the end of their journey was approaching. If there were smiles to be had, it would be best to let them happen.

Lawrence looked up at the brilliant morning light, then followed after Holo as she hurried Col along.

Having finished breakfast, Lawrence and company ventured out into town.

Their destination was a general store run by a former mercenary named Philon, about whom Fran had told them. Evidently,

despite his "general store" front, he still quietly supplied mercenary bands with goods and related services on the side.

Lawrence prided himself on having some small ability to remain calm in most situations, but this made even him nervous.

While merchants frequently claimed to be willing to throw their lives away for profit, there were in fact few who were ready to make such huge gambles. More than anything else, they knew in their hearts that bankruptcy did not mean death.

But there was no shortage of stories where mercenaries killed a merchant who had injured their pride. Given that they were not so very different from out-and-out bandits, there were surely some who would simply steal what they wanted.

It was dangerous enough to do business with mercenaries in a town like this, but there were even riskier duties. For example, the members of the mercenary troop who actually moved the goods. Once they headed out on their travels, they would become the exclusive suppliers to the avaricious mercenary bands, so as a business it was very lucrative. Mercenaries liked to spend money: They ate huge amounts, drank heavily, and would buy anything. Becoming the supplier to a troop whose star was rising and held fast for two or three years, even an apprentice just starting out could make enough money to open a shop in a town. Lawrence had heard of such things happening.

Of course, such lucrative stories always had complications. To begin with, mercenaries were an untrustworthy lot, and even supposing one found an unusually kind troop, it was not as though they could be expected to win every battle. When they lost, they would be treated just as they had treated others when they won—killed, stolen from. A mercenary merchant then faced both kinds of death, and such risk-taking men had fundamentally different ways of thinking than a traveling merchant like Lawrence.

So naturally, he was nervous.

The general store in question was situated along a lightly trafficked street and had a rather dingy facade. But its roughness gave it a rather smart, fierce aura, and as he stood before it, Lawrence took two deep breaths.

Col, too, seemed taken in by the atmosphere, and he gulped.

The only one who had not the slightest worry over mercenaries was Holo, who yawned a carefree yawn and seemed to hold an entire silent conversation with a cat curled up in a sunbeam in a corner of the street.

"Well, shall we?" Lawrence summoned his courage, walked up the steps, and reached out to open the door.

Which is when the door quite suddenly opened.

"I'll be counting on you, then. I haven't been able to hear a damned thing."

"Not with that face! You should've hired a handsomer fellow!"

"I used to be, but my old general was a rough one!"

Amid such conversation, out from within the shop came a large, bearded man, who Lawrence could tell at a glance was a mercenary.

His gray beard burst forth like smoke from his wine-ruddy complexion, though whether it had always been that way or came with his age was impossible to tell.

He had a large scar that ran down his left cheek to his chin, which drew his left eye into a permanent squint.

Just when Lawrence noticed those blue eyes catch sight of him, the man standing opposite the big one spoke. "Oh ho, this fellow looks promising. Reckon he'll be of use!"

"Hm? Hmmm..." The portly man leaned back thoughtfully as he listened to the other's words, then bent forward, as though moving some great boulder, his face coming close to Lawrence's.

He could not kill a man with a smile on his face, surely? It was a terrifying presence, more frightening than any wolf.

Trying to escape, pretending at strength, offering greetings—none of these seemed the right course of action. Lawrence simply kept silent, and tried a pleasant smile.

"Bwa-ha-ha-ha! I don't think so, shopkeep! This one's no good. He's just a no-good merchant, waiting for his chance to snatch your treasures!"

It was a terribly rude thing to say, and yet strangely, Lawrence felt no malice—probably because this was a man who simply said everything that came to his mind.

"Still, you seem a splendid young fellow. Should we meet again, let's help each other out, eh?" said the big man, patting Lawrence's shoulder with his thick hand twice, hard, then laughing a hearty laugh as he strode away.

They had not even been introduced, but the man's face was unforgettable. Lawrence would recognize it instantly, even on a cloudy night.

"I daresay he'd be an amusing male to share wine with sometime," offered Holo, much to Lawrence's chagrin.

It was then that the man standing on the other side of the shop's doorway spoke. "Well, now," he said, clearing his throat, "How can I be of service, my young merchant friend?"

Lawrence hastily composed himself and made his introduction.

It was dim inside the shop.

It was not as though there was much inside, but it still felt rather cramped, perhaps because the windows were so small. Only the nobility could afford to have glass windows, so most town homes covered theirs with oiled cloth or else let the light in through wooden shutters.

But the windows here seemed a mockery of the very idea of such attempts. It felt more like a storehouse than a shop.

Philon, the man who introduced himself as the shopkeeper, was a middle-aged fellow of about Lawrence's height, and his left leg dragged a bit when he walked. If he had claimed to have once swung a sword on the field of battle, there would be no cause to doubt him.

Philon came to a table at the back of the shop and gestured for Lawrence and his companions to sit on a couch that seemed used to receiving visitors.

"It's a shame about your timing, truly," he said, pouring wine from a plain earthen jug into a wooden cup.

"My timing?"

"Aye. Timing is the essence of success. Unfortunately, most of the assignments were worked out last week. If you plan to stay a good long while, you could leave your life in the hands of some lead-footed band, perhaps, but...do you plan to travel with those two? The heavens will punish you for that, surely."

It was here that Lawrence realized that Philon had misunderstood. "No, no, I've no intention of trying to supply any armies," he said quickly, then laughed and added, "Nor have I come to offer services as a chaplain."

Philon made a face, as though he had just watched a child stumble and fall in the distance. A smile then gradually appeared on his face. He shook his head, and it seemed as though he were about to complain about getting old. "That so? You'll pardon me. I've been so busy with work these days. I jumped to conclusions, clearly. But..."

He paused, looking down into his cup before taking a drink. Among the traveling merchants who loved making big bets, many of them favored the same gesture while drinking.

"...If so, what brings you here? You certainly haven't come to buy wheat, have you?"

Operating as a general store, a signboard saying as much hung from the eaves of the building. But given Philon's words, it was clear this was no simple shop.

In the first place, in a growing town, the tendency was toward specialization, with different merchants selling different things. The cobbler sold shoes, the pharmacist medicine, and so on. Occasionally, the sheer force of money would allow a merchant to increase the types of goods he sold, and some even became more like large trading companies—but this place did not have that feel.

So there had to be a special reason for this to be a "general store." Something such that no proper merchant would come here to buy wheat.

"Fran Vonely sent me."

When in an unfamiliar place, it was a very heartening thing for a traveling merchant to be able to use the name of someone they knew. For the one who lent their name, it was because they had a debt they expected to be repaid, even years later. And more than the simple profit that might be had by using the name, it was the confidence that came with it that Lawrence was most grateful for. In front of him, Philon's face drew tight at the mention of the name, in contrast to his earlier mild teasing.

He slowly put the cup down and looked Lawrence steadily in the eye. "So they're still alive, are they?" His tone was almost reverential.

But Lawrence was not able to deliver any good news. "Just Miss Fran," he said simply.

Philon was an experienced man. He knew what that meant.

"I see," he murmured under his breath. He closed his eyes, as though offering a brief prayer. "Though it may be providential, it still pains me to hear it. But Lady Fran is well, is she?" His voice

became brighter as he asked, and nostalgia tinged his features as he looked up.

"She sustained terrible injuries living up to her reputation... but she'll soon recover."

At Lawrence's words, Philon smiled, as though terribly relieved. Even if Fran's troop had been entirely wiped out, he seemed content that some part of their way of life yet lived on.

"So the three of you managed to live through a situation that asked some courage of her. My apologies, truly," said Philon, as he stood and put his hand to his chest. "Let me introduce myself," he said, as though beginning a prepared recitation. "My name is Philon Zimgrundt. As the thirteenth heir of the Zimgrundt name, I am the master of the Zimgrundt General Store."

He offered his hand.

Lawrence took it and found, much to his surprise, that Philon's hand was soft.

"Heh. It's been many a century since any of the Zimgrundt name went forth into battle. Some of my more considerate customers do me the honor of calling me a former mercenary, but it's through the grace of my ancestors who fought all across the world before settling to open this shop here that I'm able to operate. It's their great deeds that let me conduct this strange little business of money."

"I see," replied Lawrence. After a polite cough, he broached the subject of his visit. "The truth is, I'm hoping to learn about conditions in the northlands."

"The conditions," repeated Philon, peering again into his wine cup, as though the truth of the answer he should give were somehow hiding in it. "Lady Fran certainly lent her name to a fellow with a strange question. From your appearance, I wouldn't make you as a man who doesn't know the value of things."

Lawrence shrugged, and his reply came with a smile. "As you can probably tell from my two companions, my journey is a bit of a strange one."

At that, Philon finally turned his gaze to Holo and Col. Lawrence had heard of a mercenaries' trick—that they would bring a beautiful girl along to ensnare a merchant's gaze, then use that to pick a quarrel with them and get a better price. Philon, too, seemed well aware of such tactics.

"Indeed. However, 'conditions' could mean many things. Do you want to know about the movements of the people there? Or of goods? Or of coin?"

"People—and where they're headed."

Philon did not so much as nod or even grunt. He remained still, looking closely into Lawrence's eyes. Then he finally turned his gaze away, at which Lawrence could not hide his deep breath of relief.

"Where they're headed, eh...? Ah, I see. If I've misunderstood, I hope you'll forgive me," began Philon, then leaned forward over the table before continuing. "You want to know where the attacks are happening, don't you?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Ah. I see. So that's why you'd use Lady Fran's name to ask a question of me."

Mercenaries were moved by money. And if one could see the flow of money, they could understand the motivations of whoever was pulling the strings.

Philon's face grew hard. Lawrence swallowed and waited. He waited—for he knew how important the information he sought was.

"Still...," murmured Philon as he stared down at the table, then up to Lawrence, then back and forth between Col and Holo. His expression was somewhere between exasperation and admiration.

"Yes...?" prompted Lawrence, unable to hide his nervousness. Thereupon Philon drew his chin in and assumed a serious posture, as though he were about to play his trump card.

"To have them both as your companions, you certainly can't be judged by your appearance."

"Huh?" asked Lawrence, and it was only Holo who laughed out loud.

"My, my," said Philon with a smile, adding, "Was I wrong?"

"He's hardly so able a man," said Holo with a straight face, at which Philon shifted his gaze deliberately from Holo to Lawrence.

Given that Philon was used to dealing with the dog-pack-like mercenary bands, he was instantly able to apprehend just who was in charge here.

"Is that so. Still, you'd be surprised how great a general such a man can be."

"'Tis only because they're so busy minding everything around them, is it not?" said Holo with a fang-baring grin, at which Philon appeared genuinely surprised and smacked his own cheek.

Lawrence had no idea what they were talking about. He and Col met each other's eyes.

"Ha-ha-ha! Well, now, I've certainly got some peculiar guests today. If I make light of them, they'll get the best of me."

Philon cleared his throat while Holo smiled happily.

Lawrence still did not understand any of this, but when he finished laughing, Philon's face was exceedingly pleasant. "Fine, then. I'll help you."

"—! My thanks to you!" said Lawrence, his reflexes in that particular situation being better even than Holo's.

Philon grinned and nodded. "I'm afraid I'll have to add the tiresome condition that you not speak of what I tell you to

anyone else. So, where is it that you want to know about? Many mercenaries are hired through landlords. And the ones giving that money to those landowners—"

"The Debau Company," said Lawrence, at which the interrupted Philon nodded.

"Quite. However, the Debau Company is not of such a scale that it can operate on its own. They have the cooperation of the landlords. Most of the mercenaries they've hired are getting their provisions through me, and people in my business have good ties. I get information from other towns, from those in the same business. So...to be blunt, I'm more or less aware of which places in the northlands are safe and which aren't."

As Philon spoke, Holo lost the aura of nonchalance she had come in with. Now it was her turn to try to remain calm.

"The old name of the place we're looking for is Yoitsu."

"Yoitsu?"

Repeating what had just been said seemed to be one of the ways Philon jogged his own memory. His eyes stared into space for a moment, and immediately thereafter he spoke. "Sorry, I've not heard of it. Though if it's in an old story, I may have heard that."

"The Moon-Hunting Bear."

"Ah, yes. More than a few mercenary bands use a picture of it on their standards. Perhaps it's the name of a town or village destroyed by the great beast. I've forgotten where I heard this, but...since there are many mercenaries from the northlands, I might have heard it from one of them. I'm sorry I couldn't be of more help," said Philon, seeming genuinely apologetic.

"Actually," said Lawrence immediately, "we've asked Fran to draw us a map of the northlands, including Yoitsu. Once it arrives, we should know the current location of wherever Yoitsu was."

Philon's reply was quick. "You gained her trust so quickly—!"

Evidently, that was the most surprising aspect of all.

Lawrence nodded with a somewhat abashed smile, but Philon only gave his face a good, long look. "I see...I wouldn't mind having such a map myself! So then, you three. Have you anything else you'd like to ask?" he asked a little jokingly.

Lawrence smiled and looked over at Col. "In that case, what of the village of Pinu?"

It was Col who found this question the most surprising.

Although Col was concerned about Holo's homeland, he was still more worried about his own, and though he tried to hide this within himself, Lawrence was well aware of the boy's true feelings. Because after all, just as any purchase of goods required an exchange, information had a price, too. And Col had nothing to pay with.

Col's face took on an expression of utter shock, but as Philon looked back and forth between Col and Lawrence, he seemed very pleased indeed. "That I can tell you right off. It's close to a village that a parish in the east dispatched soldiers to, some years back. The region's thick with skilled hunters, some of whom joined bands here and there. For a major push into the hard north country, they would need a confident foothold, and that was one of the likely places for it. None of those men are stupid enough to destroy their own homes, and mercenaries are surprisingly respectful of the homes of their comrades. So for the time being, Pinu's safe."

Philon directed this information not to Lawrence, but to Col. He used simple words and spoke slowly.

If the couch he was sitting in had not had a back, Col's slump of relief might well have sent him tumbling over backward.

"Ha-ha-ha, though I don't know how much use to you any of that is."

"No, thank you, truly," said Lawrence. When Col hastily tried to offer his own thanks, the words choked up in his throat.

Holo stood from her seat, unconcerned, then sat down again next to Col. In times like these, nothing was as comforting as her smile could be.

"So we'll talk again about Yoitsu when your map arrives, shall we?"

"It seems so, yes."

"Understood. Now then, have you arranged your lodging? There hasn't been much snow this year, so there are more travelers than normal. Most places are full by now, and you may be unable to find accommodations."

"We've no worries on that count. The Beast and Fish Tail sent us to Eunice's inn."

"Oh ho. You're no ordinary traveling party, that's for sure," said Philon, stroking his beard.

Lawrence had not known there were no vacancies in the inns, but it was true they had managed to secure exceptional boarding. Just as he was thinking he would need to give thanks for that later, Philon grinned and spoke up.

"It's no easy thing to get in the good graces of the barmaid there."

How did he know? Lawrence immediately thought, at which Philon grinned and elaborated.

"The innkeeper at Eunice's place is a widower, you see. He's rather soft on that particular barmaid, so if she asks, he'll kick someone out just to open up a room for her."

Lawrence smiled in understanding. Evidently the barmaid was even more devilish than Holo could be.

"Well, it seems I wasn't much able to help you. Even if you'd needed a room, I don't know that I could've arranged it for you."

"Still, you've probably left an impression of someone who helped me a great deal."

This general store owner, the descendant of mercenaries, had

a surprisingly gentle smile. "Quite so! I'd certainly like a copy of that map. I wonder how I might manage it...," Philon said as he held his cheek in his hand, elbow on the table.

If he had really been angling for the map, he would not be acting the way he was. *He's a good merchant*, Lawrence thought to himself.

"In any case, once the map arrives, come visit again."

"I shall. And I'll see if I can't find other favor to ask of you, as well."

"By all means, please do."

Lawrence stood and shook Philon's hand again. Philon shook not just Lawrence's hand, but Col's and Holo's as well.

Just as Lawrence said, "Well, then," and was about to bring the encounter to an end, there was a knock at the door.

"Good grief. So busy today!"

"I should think that's a good thing."

"So it is." Philon waved to Lawrence and his companions, then called out past them in a loud voice, "The door's open!"

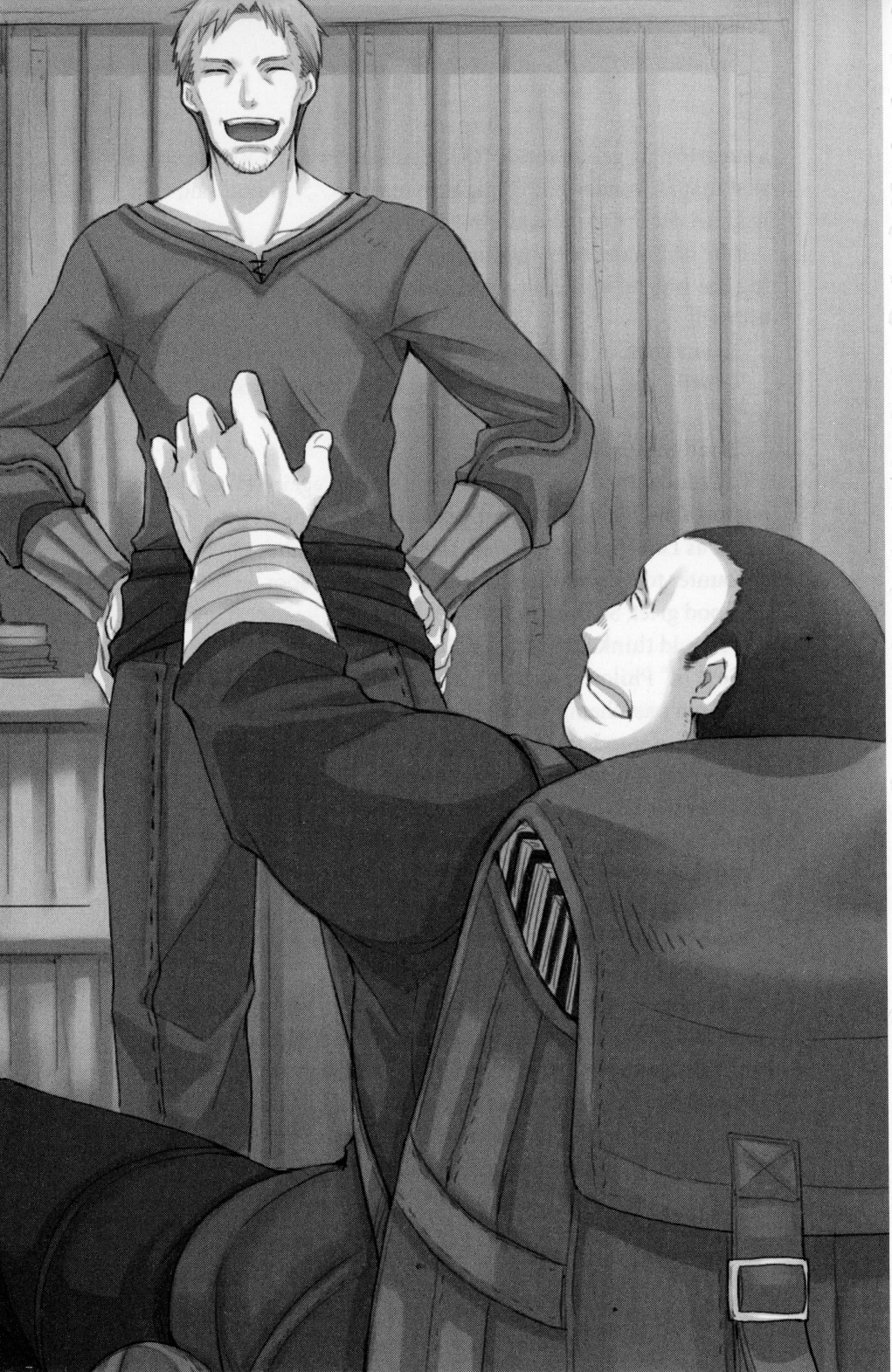
Lawrence stood aside and opened the door, thinking to first let in whoever it was. Thereupon, however, the figure on the other side also tried to open the door, but instead his large, round body stumbled through it and he gave a loud "Wah!"

Lawrence was at the door, and Philon at his table with his wine; both their eyes went wide in surprise.

The big man who had fallen face-first on the floor had a mountain of goods on his back.

"Oh. Here I was wondering who it could be, but it's you, Le Roi," said Philon, looking down at the man. He was wriggling comically, even clownishly, under his load of goods.

But Philon did not appear inclined to help. With nothing else to do, Lawrence helped the man to his feet. From the smell of dust on him, he must have just arrived in town.



"Ouch! My apologies, sir."

"Not at all. Are you all right?"

The man called Le Roi nodded abashedly and repeatedly in response to Lawrence's question, all while skillfully regaining his feet underneath a collection of goods nearly as big as he was. He might have appeared to be fat, but evidently he was just well built.

"Still, now you've come all the way out here, too, and your timing's no good, either," said Philon.

"Huh?"

"You heard the rumors of war and came here with a sackful of scriptures, am I right? Unfortunately, those who would've wanted them have already packed their things and headed north."

His face half-blackened with road dust, Le Roi seemed stunned at the merciless words and sat right back down on the spot.

Scriptures—that meant he was a bookseller...

In any case, this was the sort of thing that was the constant nightmare of all traveling merchants. Lawrence was sympathetic.

Le Roi waved both hands unrestrainedly in the air. "Damn you, God! Have you any idea how I suffered to bring these here?!"

Philon bared his teeth in a great grin as Le Roi flailed his arms about like a petulant child. His feelings were understandable, but Le Roi's display was certainly an exceptional one. Such humor could easily endear one to others. He probably traded on this.

Lawrence was smiling, too, but then he realized that Philon's gaze was on the doorway. Immediately thereafter, a noble, dignified voice rang out.

"Blame your own avarice before you lay responsibility at God's feet."

A small-framed person entered the shop.

It was hard to imagine a person less suited to the surroundings. The person who had crossed the threshold with such words was clearly of the Church and dressed in a nun's clothing to boot.

But that was not what widened Lawrence's eyes.

Entering the door, the person soon took note of Lawrence and his companions. She calmed her expression so as not to appear surprised. And then, with eyes as sharp as they ever were, she spoke.

"Quite a coincidence."

On that count, Lawrence was in total agreement. "Indeed it is," he said. This girl had always been difficult for him, but he forced her name out after a cough. "It has been a while, Miss Elsa."

Her pulled-back hair and honey-colored eyes that betrayed no emotion were just as they had been. Her cheeks were a bit sunken, perhaps owing to the unfamiliar travel. Out from under her overcoat peeked her nun's robes, once dyed a deep black but now whitish with dust.

And yet her tone betrayed no fatigue; she was admirable, if stubbornly so.

"What, you two know each other?" Le Roi watched Elsa's and Lawrence's greetings as though they were a scene out of a stage play, his face shifting busily to and fro between them.

"He once came to my village's aid."

"Oh ho!" Le Roi's mouth opened in surprise so widely that it thinned even his puffy cheeks. "So you're from Tereo as well, then, sir?" he asked, looking up to Lawrence. He was a bit shorter than Lawrence to begin with, and his heavy burden caused him to stoop over.

"No, I just happened to be passing through and was able to be of some small assistance."

"Oh ho, I see. My goodness." Every bit of Le Roi's exaggerated bumbling seemed to be quite on purpose. But there was no telling what hid behind the act of such a merchant. Many acted this way because they were fully aware of how sly they would appear otherwise.

Of course, there was no way of knowing whether Le Roi was such a man or not, but that was no reason for Lawrence to let his guard down. Lawrence smiled pleasantly, declining to say anything further. It was Philon who ended up speaking next.

"This is a general store, not a tavern. Might I ask you to celebrate your reunion elsewhere?"

At the cold exasperation in his words, Le Roi looked to Philon and smacked his own cheeks in chagrin. "Ah, apologies!"

Elsa was not the effusive type, and she said nothing further to Lawrence or his companions.

But given that Holo did not seem to be expressing any irritation at Elsa's quietness, she must have realized that the girl was more exhausted from her travels than anything else.

"And your companion appears to be quite tired. You ought to secure lodgings before venturing out again, hmm?" said Philon. He had dealt enough with those who lived by travel to know what such exhaustion looked like.

Elsa merely stood there, neither refuting nor confirming this, but Le Roi nodded again in that exaggerated way of his. "You're quite right, quite right indeed! We came here without even changing out of our travel clothes."

Lawrence did not fail to notice the look of worry that passed over Philon's face. The only reasons you went directly to a trading partner without even stopping to change clothes were because you were uncommonly close to them or because you were in trouble.

In this case it was surely the latter, which Le Roi immediately confirmed. "Might you arrange a room for us?"

Philon did not hide his look of irritation, and he took a long breath in through his nose. "You've bad timing."

The merciless words were delivered with exquisite precision.

"Wh—come now, Mr. Philon. Don't be so heartless! We don't need a fancy room, you know. I've asked at inns all over the city.

I don't mind being put alongside my goods somewhere, but my companion"— said Le Roi, pausing to grab Elsa's shoulders with his hands and shove her forward, as though he were a livestock owner showing off a prize hen—"I can't let such a fate befall her, you see."

Elsa, meanwhile, wore a look of terrible embarrassment, while Philon looked flatly irritated.

If Le Roi was determined to be so blunt, it would be ultimately impossible to refuse him. Moreover, he was not actually asking an unreasonable thing, so it was not going to be much of a black mark on his reputation. After all, no matter how much the stubborn Elsa might try to hide her fatigue, anyone who looked at her could tell that what she needed was a good rest in a proper bed.

Also, unlike Holo, Elsa was not traveling as a nun as a matter of practicality, which was quite plain to see. Le Roi knew perfectly well how to use the perception others would likely have of her.

If Holo had been a tough middle-aged man, she might have been something like him.

"Still, my storehouses and rooms are all packed full with goods. The apprentices are having to wedge themselves into the gaps to sleep. And if they don't work, there's no telling what they'll use their pent-up energy for." Philon looked through half-lidded eyes at Elsa, who Le Roi had pushed forward. "I can't allow harm to come to one of God's lambs in the night."

There was neither pretense nor affectation in these words, and even Elsa stiffened a little upon hearing them.

With his hands on her shoulders, Le Roi could hardly fail to notice this. He moved to stand in front of Elsa, as though Philon were one of the starving beasts of which he himself spoke.

"I don't care what happens to me. But please, just for her..."

"It's for her sake that I am saying this."

"Oh, God! Please forgive this merciless man!" cried out Le

Roi theatrically, but given that he himself had cursed God just moments earlier, the words did not carry much weight.

Philon sighed a long-suffering sigh, while Col looked taken aback at the strange newcomer. Holo was the only one who appeared amused.

The situation felt more intractable than ever, and Lawrence finally gave in and spoke. "If you don't mind the room where we're staying..."

"Wha—" Holo began to protest, but then realized the stinginess such a protest would reveal on her part and hastily shut her mouth. Nonetheless, her eyes stared accusingly at Lawrence.

By contrast, Philon appeared as though the problem had been taken off his hands in the best possible way, and Col smiled, since they had been able to help people who were clearly in trouble.

And as for Le Roi, he made a face as though his savior had descended into a hell where the land had split and the seas had dried, just to save him. "Oh! Oh, what a wonderful person! God's blessings will surely be upon your head...!"

Le Roi's words trailed off there, and it was not clear whether or how he meant to continue. It was clear enough that he did not much care whether Lawrence was listening or not.

It was finally Elsa who interrupted Le Roi's hearty shaking of Lawrence's hand, and she did not mince words.

"We have no means to repay you," she said, and the look in her eyes as she stared up at Lawrence was very nearly hostile.

But Lawrence had had a good hard look at the hardships Elsa faced back in Tereo. While they had managed to overcome their problems with Holo's help, the villagers would surely not have been able to let their guard down in the aftermath.

She might be so poor that they could turn her upside down and shake her and not a single coin would fall to the ground.

Lawrence decided to pay such forthrightness the respect it

deserved. "I believe they say good deeds done here on earth will store up wealth in heaven, do they not?"

Elsa was flustered by this, but managed an answer. "One cannot carry one's coin purse through the gates of heaven, after all."

"If so, I'd best make myself into a shape better suited to fit through, I should think."

For a moment, Elsa made a face as though she had swallowed something bitter.

For someone as destitute as her to stay in the inn room of another, it would mean imposing upon them for more than simply accommodations. There would be meals to consider, for one. Lawrence and company were not so heartless that they would dig into their meals while those sitting beside them had nothing.

Elsa was well aware of that and knew also that Lawrence and his companions were extending such a helping hand to her, and it surely pained her.

But thanks to a certain close-at-hand traveling companion of his, Lawrence was well used to dealing with those who found it difficult to accept generosity. "Of course, in this life, I'll expect what I lend to be repaid."

In times like these, it was often good to lighten the mood with a joke.

Elsa was no fool, and at this merchant's consideration for her feelings, she finally offered a faint smile. "We shall impose upon you, then," she said, and like the devout priestess she was, she clasped her hands and bowed her head, presumably offering a prayer.

Next came the smart sound of clapping hands.

It was none other than Le Roi, looking for all the world like a satisfied matchmaker at a wedding. "Well, well, this certainly is a burden off my chest! Splendid, splendid!"

"I suppose I ought to help as well. If it's just you, sir, you may stay here," said Philon, indicating the surface of his desk—though

surely he was not saying that Le Roi ought to sleep on the desk itself. "There may well be others who come staggering drunkenly in, but as long as you don't mind them..."

"Of course not! Ah, God's will be done! Surely His blessings will be upon your head, Mr. Philon—"

Philon made a distasteful face and waved his hands as though shooing a dog away. Le Roi, however, did not seem particularly offended by this.

After this, he explained that Elsa's belongings were on a mule outside, so the two went out together.

Lawrence briefly gave his regards to Philon and was about to leave the shop when he noticed Holo, still entirely put out.

"Displeased?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

"I wouldn't say I'm displeased," pouted Holo.

Lawrence found himself smiling at the exchange, which reminded him of another they had shared—when he had asked if she minded whether a certain shepherdess traveled with them to the city.

At the time, he had mistaken her anger to mean that she wanted to travel with him and him alone, just the two of them. In the end, she had seen through his misunderstanding and teased him mercilessly for it.

So what would happen now?

In the few seconds it took to descend the stone steps from the shop, Lawrence gazed at Holo's irritated profile, then finally spoke. "So you've no problem at all, then?"

Holo stopped mid-descent. Col was following immediately behind her and, unable to stop in time, ran right into her.

Pushed by Col, Holo took another step forward, but nonetheless did not look away from Lawrence.

"I-I'm sorry...?" said Lawrence.

Continuing to stare at Lawrence, Holo took Col's hand and

very purposefully interlaced her fingers with his. "Just as you said, I've no problem at all."

She finished by sticking her tongue out at him, then walking off, pulling Col along with her.

Le Roi looked up as he noticed the two, then looked over to Lawrence.

"They're heading back to the inn room to tidy up ahead of us," said Lawrence. There was no reason to doubt it.

Le Roi nodded. "You've taught them well," he said, impressed.

Elsa, unloading her things from the mule, paused at hearing those words. She turned her amber eyes to Lawrence. "Is that so...?"

Hey now, thought Lawrence, until the impossible hit him: She was attempting to make a joke.

Just as meeting Fran had profoundly affected Col, Elsa, too, seemed to have changed since they had last met. Or perhaps this was a face that Evan the miller saw frequently.

Lawrence's idle musings were cut off by Elsa saying, "I'm ready."

Most of the mule's load had been unloaded, and just as Lawrence was wondering if he would be able to handle it all himself, he saw Elsa take up a small shoulder bag.

Evidently it had been packed away in the very back of the luggage.

Given the size of the bag, it probably held things that Elsa could not afford to lose—parchments with certifications on them and letters from noblemen in various places.

Holo was traveling as a nun, but a true woman of the cloth had a different sort of aura about her.

"Well, shall we go?" said Lawrence.

"I leave myself in your care," said Elsa, her eyes as stern as ever.

CHAPTER TWO



Col's clothes were in a terrible state, too.

His coat was full of seams and patches, and its edges frayed. His trousers were too short, leaving his ankles bared, and his sandals were thinner than a slice of meat carved by a stingy butcher.

He was underfed, too, and looked light enough that a stiff breeze could blow him away.

There was a difference, though, between simply having no money and the honorable poverty of the Church.

Elsa was tired, and her cheeks slightly sunken, and her clothes were of no great quality. Yet as she sat, she nonetheless emanated a noble sort of power, surely from the light she held within herself.

Even when told to sit on the bed, Elsa would hear none of it; somehow, they managed to get her to sit in a chair, and instead of wine, they gave her a nourishing drink made of ginger, honey, and hot sheep's milk.

She did not hesitate to accept it, but likewise did not hesitate in thanksgiving.

While not at all threatening, she did nevertheless have a certain unmistakable dignity about her.

She put the drink to her lips, drank, then sighed in relief. Lawrence saw this and echoed her sentiment.

"The reason I left the village?" When it came to Elsa, she could not be bribed with food, but it was clear that her nerves had been much calmed.

"Yes. To be honest, I just can't figure it out." Lawrence made his simple curiosity clear as he poured wine into a cup, a gesture done to keep Elsa company as she drank.

"I'm looking for someone," came Elsa's unexpected answer.

"Looking...for someone?"

"Not a specific person, though." She put her cup to her lips and, after sipping quietly from it, closed her eyes. A deep sigh departed from her.

Having gotten used to Holo and Col's heartier eating and drinking, watching Elsa was like watching a noble lady.

"I'm looking for someone who can enter the holy service of the Church."

"But—" said Lawrence, just as Elsa opened her eyes and smiled a thin smile.

"Thanks to you, the flame of faith has been kindled in Tereo. Moreover, your incredible power destroyed Enberch's schemes. Now there are even people from Enberch who come all the way to our village to buy sweets."

As she spoke the words "incredible power," Elsa glanced at Holo. There were thanks in her gaze, which Holo surely noticed, even though she was gazing out the window. She was gnawing on a piece of jerky, as though none of this had anything to do with her.

Holo was intractable as always, but her wolf's ears flicked by way of reply.

Elsa knew Holo's true form, so there was no need for her to wear her uncomfortable hood currently.

"The people of Enberch do not know the details of our village. They would surely be surprised to learn I alone tend the church. Of course, the Enberch bishop's lips have been well sealed, but he will not behave himself forever."

The church was a near-total patriarchy. While some famous abbeys had female abbesses at their head, those were abbeys—not churches.

Elsa sipped from her cup as though swallowing that very unfairness, then coughed lightly. She had probably swallowed a chunk of ginger.

"Ahem...excuse me. So I've come in search of someone who can take on this holy duty in our village. For such a task, I can hardly send mere letters out, hither and yon."

"You need to find someone who'll measure up to you, then?" Lawrence said with a bit of mischief in his voice, at which Elsa chuckled.

He suspected that Elsa enjoyed putting on her stiff-shouldered performance. "Of course. My father, Father Franz, left the church in my care. I must find an individual worthy of that."

The man who had raised Elsa, Father Franz, had also compiled a book on the pagan deity worshipped in Tereo. Not only had he easily deflected the accusations of heresy that came as a result, but he had also established ties with powerful people in many places, building an independent church within the village—an accomplished man, to be sure.

Of course, there was certain jest in Elsa's tone. She was perfectly aware of the distance between her ideals and the likely reality.

"That's the primary reason for my travels, but...," said Elsa, looking to Holo.

Holo looked over her shoulder with a question on her face, at which Elsa smiled such a kind smile that it took Lawrence by surprise—so she *could* make such expressions.

"I've become aware of how truly ignorant of the world I am. I was hoping this journey would give me a chance to see more of the world."

"Mm," said Holo through her nose, as though approving of such resolve. Holo herself had been removed from the flow of the world, having spent all those centuries in the wheat fields. She was a bit ahead of Elsa in that area, so perhaps Elsa thought of her as something of a mentor.

Lawrence smiled a defeated smile, then turned back to Elsa. "That must have been a difficult decision to make, surely."

As a traveling merchant, he had had occasion to see just how it was that small villages often regarded the larger world. There were even those who were quite certain that aside from their town or village, the entire rest of the world had quite literally fallen to ruin. Regardless how strong her faith in God was, it was quite extraordinary for a woman to venture out the way Elsa had.

At Lawrence's implied question, Elsa regarded him, saying nothing. At her chest hung a hand-carved symbol of the Church, quite unlike when Lawrence had first seen her in Tereo.

It would have been foolish to ask who had made it.

When Lawrence had left Tereo, beside Elsa had stood a certain brave—if uncertain—boy.

"Of course, I thought to give up on it many times, but I've had God's guidance all the way."

Holo had come to hate being treated as a god after so many centuries of it, but that did not mean she much enjoyed people talking about other gods around her. She flicked one of her perfectly triangular wolf ears sideways and listened.

"That bookseller, you mean?" said Lawrence, and Elsa nodded slowly.

"That's right."

"You seem to encounter the strangest people," Lawrence found

himself saying without thinking. He suddenly realized his blunder, but Elsa merely laughed.

She then covered her mouth with her hand. "Apologies," she said. "But I can see why you would think so," she added. "I had only met him once before, but I knew he was a longtime acquaintance of Father Franz. And in Father's letters, it was written that this was a man I could trust in times of hardship. If Father trusted him, then I ought to trust him, too. No matter how silly or greedy he might appear to be."

Lawrence could not imagine Elsa simply falling for the act of such a canny merchant. His guess seemed not to have been wrong, but he still felt as though his assumptions were being criticized in a roundabout sort of way.

Lawrence scratched his head, and Elsa took a deep breath, then began to speak as though delivering a sermon.

"I would be lying if I said I hadn't had my own worries, but he's a very sincere man. Of course, there's no mistaking his avarice—but you might say that avarice is where his sincerity comes from."

She had a good eye for people.

At this, Lawrence finally saw what sort of person the bookseller was.

"So what you mean is that he's after Father Franz's library, then," Lawrence said flatly, at which Elsa gave him a pleasant smile.

"There's no one like him in the village, you see. At first I was quite bewildered, but...then I realized there's no great difference between being faithful to your own avarice and being faithful to the teachings of God. He's tried everything he can think of to get me to tell him where Father Franz's library is—but always amicably."

Lawrence, too, had wanted to get to the library, in order to learn about the location of Holo's homeland. But the method he had used to do so was hardly praiseworthy. He had used Elsa's

piety against her, and there in the church's sanctuary had cornered her into helping them.

When he thought about it now, it again occurred to him what a sinful thing he had done.

He looked, and Elsa's smile was gone. She looked at him intently.

He averted his gaze, ever the weak traveling merchant, and looked to Holo—but despite her complicity, she seemed to think none of this had anything to do with her.

"So that is his aim, and when I told him I was of a mind to travel to this town, he was only too happy to agree. The journey was difficult...if it had gone on much longer, I might have finally told him the library's location."

Her first journey would have been one long series of new experiences. If she had someone reliable at her side, she might well come to trust in them unconditionally, like a newly hatched chick regarding the first thing it saw as its parent.

But even so, Le Roi might well be a person worthy of such trust, as a truly experienced merchant would be.

"All the great saints left their homes and journeyed, secluding themselves away in remote forests or deserts, and I finally understand why. Going out into the world for the first time, I have truly understood how weak humans are."

It was an observation worthy of the clergy, and Lawrence nodded with a faint smile. No doubt Col, who could understand her position even better than Lawrence could, was nodding with his serious little face.

"Which is why I've finally been able to answer a question that's plagued me ever since you and your companions left my village."

These words piqued Holo's interest as well as Lawrence's. She removed her gaze from the window and over to Elsa.

"A question?"

"Yes. The question of why, when you have such power, you

would choose even now to travel with a simple horse-drawn wagon."

It was something Lawrence had considered many times himself. If he borrowed Holo's power, he could become incredibly wealthy in no time at all. There were any number of ways it might be done...

But he had not done so, and even when his very life had been in danger, he had searched for ways to escape that did not involve relying on Holo's power—even when Holo herself was ready to act.

Partially, this was because he wanted to preserve some semblance of pride in front of Holo. But there was another thought at the root of it all.

"I've become painfully aware of just how powerless I am. Borrowing the power of my companion will not make that weakness disappear. So I try to rely on my own abilities. Or..." He paused to look over at Holo, if only to disguise his own embarrassment. "...Or to ask for her help in addition to my strengths. Don't try to fill a small bowl with a large amount—every merchant knows this," concluded Lawrence. "Whenever I've embarrassed myself, it's because I broke this rule."

Holo cackled.

"They say the world is vast, and it's true." Elsa looked down at the contents of the cup in her hand and quietly closed her eyes. Elsa, ever as sharp as a drawn blade, seemed now deeper than she had before.

People do not stay as they were when one met them, Holo had cried, in this very city. And it was true—people changed.

And even as such change was unavoidable, it was also not always for the worse. Lawrence's path since meeting Holo had, if anything, been a more optimistic one than before. But did Holo feel the same way? As she looked out the window, her ears fell the same way they did whenever she was trying to endure embarrassment.

She might well be angry at him later.

"I give thanks to God that we have been able to meet again."

At Elsa's simple, unadorned statement, Lawrence nodded heartily.

Travel brought with it many encounters, and likewise many discoveries. Some were reminders of the world's vastness, while others illustrated one's own smallness. Just as one might be struck by a breathtaking vista, one might also feel pain at seeing the aftermath of a terrible battle.

Or—one might simply experience the shock of the fragrance of another culture.

Elsa's expression as she regarded what seemed for all the world to be a cut of red meat before her was the very image of this shock, no matter how clearly it was said that it was in fact a fish tail.

The prohibition against the consumption of red meat by members of the clergy came as naturally to them as not breathing underwater did to someone who did not want to drown. But to think that there was such an obvious way around that rule...

Sitting next to Lawrence, Holo seemed to greatly relish Elsa's expression.

"Miss, if you're having trouble believing it, would you like to see the many letters of permission from successive bishops we've had?" asked the cheerful barmaid, again mindful of the tavern that day, as she carried cups of ale to another table of patrons.

Most taverns fell silent the moment a true clergy member entered the establishment, but this place was special. No one paid Elsa any special mind as they caroused the day's fatigue away.

"No...that's all right. The world is a large place," said Elsa, dropping her eyes to the food before her. She clumsily pierced it with her knife, then took a massive bite, as though swallowing it down along with the reality of all the world's disappointments.

If Holo was surprised by this, Col was even more so, and the only one smiling was the barmaid.

"Mm...Mmph..." Elsa chewed and swallowed and, with her eyes tightly shut, felt about on the table for her cup. Col took pity on her and handed it to her, and she mumbled her thanks before drinking the watered fruit juice.

She drank like she was trying to wash everything away—as though she had eaten something terribly impure.

Just as Lawrence was wondering if he had taken his teasing too far, Elsa put her empty cup down. "S-so spicy...," she said in a strangled voice.

Though she had drunk no wine, her cheeks were red. Her eyes, too, were red—for Elsa, whose ascetic life was a matter of course, this strongly spiced food and its strange need for wine was almost like a drug.

"Hah, that's because it's meant to go with wine. Here, try this."

The Church had no prohibition against wine, so long as it was taken in moderation. There were more famously hard-drinking priests and preachers than one could count. And since wine always called out for food, they tended to be large men, too. There was one famous Church doctor nicknamed "The Angel Physician," whose belly was so round and stuck out so far that his place at the table had a special cutout just so that he could fit.

"What's this...?"

"Clams fried in butter. They're from the port town downriver, hauled up still in the shell. You can even eat them raw."

It was rare to eat raw food, except in the far north, or if one was a pagan. Such a custom existed in Lenos because of its close trade association with Kerube.

Naturally, Elsa reacted to the barmaid's jest with eyes round in surprise.

Holo watched this delightedly and was about to call out to the barmaid, but Lawrence politely moved Holo's gaze back to the table.

"If the tail's too strongly spiced for you, you might find it's just right for putting on a bit of bread. The cooking here is excellent, but the bread is, unfortunately, a tad—" Lawrence was interrupted by a plate with even more food on it hitting the table.

He looked and saw the barmaid looking down at him with a smile.

"The bread is unfortunately a tad...expensive," Lawrence amended, at which the barmaid nodded, satisfied, and strode back into the kitchen. Holo snickered and heaped boiled beans atop a piece of bread.

"The larger world does have all sorts of food," said Elsa wondrously.

On the table was meat, vegetables, and shellfish, some roasted, some steamed, some boiled. Some were strongly flavored, others subtly, and even the bread was different from what Elsa was used to, cut as it was into thin slices, making it convenient to top with other things.

Not even the nearby town of Enberch, to say nothing of the tiny village of Tereo itself, conducted much in the way of trade with the outside world, so it was not well-informed about food in other places.

Lawrence had, in fact, used that ill-informedness to save Tereo.

"But the surprises are only so frequent when you're just starting out. Every day dizzied me when I'd first set out from my home village, but after a month of journeying, I had the face of a seasoned traveler."

Truly, it was amid such monotonous days that he had had the incredible fortune to encounter Holo—one never knew what the world would bring.

Still, Elsa smiled as though thankful for Lawrence's consideration of her.

"Mmph...Mm..." Holo wiped a bean crumb from the corner of her mouth with her finger, then opened her mouth between chews to lick it up. She swallowed it down hurriedly with a drink, then proceeded to her second bite. Artless in eating, drinking, and sleep: That was Holo.

"Mm?" As she opened her mouth wide to take another bite, Holo finally noticed Elsa's gaze and, for a moment, seemed to hesitate, as though unsure what to do. Finally, though, she took the bite anyway.

Lawrence frantically searched for some sort of excuse to make on her behalf. But as he looked down like he was trying to convince himself of something, Elsa reached for another slice of bread. She was about to bite directly into it, but then seemed to remember Lawrence's words from a moment earlier. Holding her sleeve back with her other hand, Elsa hesitantly reached out to the fish tail dish and dipped the piece of bread in it.

But what stopped her hand was not the memory of how spicy the dish had been. Rather, she had spotted Col, who likewise was dipping chunks of bread into the dish, but he was letting the sauce drip everywhere, utterly carefree.

"..."

Unlike the arrogant Holo, Col took heed of the gazes of others. As soon as he noticed Elsa's stunned, wide-eyed gaze, he immediately knew he had done something wrong and began to cast about for what it might be—except that his mouth was full of bread, so it was all he could do to chew busily away at it.

Holo had often compared Col's way of eating to a squirrel's. That might have been why she shared her food with him: It was like feeding a squirrel.

In truth, while Col's table habits could hardly be called refined, they did have a certain charm to them.

"Such terrible manners," said Elsa, finally unable to contain herself.

Col had just taken a second bite when she spoke. He froze and closed his eyes, then timidly held out the bread to return it to Elsa.

Holo watched this, grinning, then made ready to pop the remaining bread into her mouth as though none of it was any of her concern.

"The same goes for you," said Elsa.

Holo had her own reasons. While she did pause just before eating the bread, it was only to raise her chin and look Elsa in the eyes before devouring the bread anyway.

Elsa sighed and directed her criticism at Lawrence. "In my village, in times like these, we remind people that they oughtn't eat like thieves."

In other words, without any serenity and uncaring of what others might think.

Lawrence nodded politely, but it was Holo who spoke in an unruffled tone. "This is normal for travelers."

Elsa shrunk back at this statement, perhaps realizing just how ignorant she was of the wider world's ways and just how different they might be from her own common sense.

However, Holo's words were unfairly aimed right at Elsa's ignorance and credulity. It did not in fact follow that all travelers abandoned their manners entirely.

Lawrence saw Elsa flinch and smacked the nastily grinning Holo's head in retaliation. "Apologies," he offered. "We have a tendency toward unrefined mealtimes, I'm afraid."

"It—it's all right."

Elsa regained her composure and straightened herself, then looked up at the ceiling, as though something had occurred to her.

Lawrence followed her gaze, but Elsa then looked back down and slowly lowered her eyelids. She then cleared her throat quietly and spoke.

"I give my thanks for this incredible meal. I wish that I could offer something in return, but as you can see, I am a traveler from an impoverished village. Yet I do have something." She opened her eyes and seemed almost happy. "I could teach you better table manners."

Sitting next to her, Col looked at Elsa uncertainly, and then gave Lawrence the same look from across the table. It was likely he had never in his whole life been told he had poor manners.

Of course, considering Col's position, it might well be a good thing for him to learn at least the basics while he had the chance. At the moment, it was generous to compare his manners to a beast's.

Discerning Lawrence's conclusion from his expression, Elsa then regarded Col with a kind smile. "Do not worry. There were people in my village who were quite terrible at learning things, but even they got the knack of it."

Lawrence remembered Evan and how his scattering of bread crumbs had so infuriated Elsa. Holo cackled, seemingly remembering the same thing, but Elsa merely sighed and repeated what she had said before. "The same goes for you."

"Wha...just who do you think I—"

"It's the same for everyone. And with that attitude, you ought to be able to behave properly. There's simply no excuse."

Holo had a great ability to play the part, but it was also one of her nastier aspects. Elsa had seen right through this, and Holo turned away in irritation.

"These dishes are so splendid, after all. If you eat them properly, they'll be even more delicious." Elsa smiled gently, as befit one dressed in a nun's habit.

When her face was stern and her tone harsh, she seemed very much like Fran, but when she was like this, she was entirely different.

Fran had lived through her bloody life with nothing but her scriptures and her comrades to see her through it. On that count, Elsa had a somewhat unreliable but still committed partner.

The same flower might bloom with different colors, depending on the soil and environment.

"Ah...er...," stammered Col, looking to Lawrence.

While Holo once called the forest of Yoitsu her home, that was not true of Col. If he truly aimed to study Church law and attain a high rank within the clergy, his manners would be important.

Lawrence nodded, whereupon Col made a face like a passenger who had just missed his wagon. But one could tell the value of a person by whether they gave up at such a predicament or began walking on foot.

Col was very much the latter sort of person.

He nodded uncertainly, chin down, looking very noble indeed.

"I-if you please, then."

"Very well," said Elsa with a smile. Beside her, Holo took a strangled gulp of wine.

Elsa's instructions were not so very unreasonable.

Do not rush your eating. Take one bite at a time. Do not spill. Chew quietly. Don't lean over your food, but bring it to your mouth. And so on and so forth. And yet it seemed that Col was hearing each of these for the very first time.

After all, if he did not eat quickly, his food might be taken. He had never had enough for spillage to be a problem. There was never pleasant conversation such that noisy eating mattered. He had never even gotten used to washing and drying his hands.

He had only very recently been able to take his time eating—since meeting Lawrence and Holo.

Once Col finished his meal after minding all these new rules, he stood and addressed Lawrence with a seriousness. "When I eat that slowly, it seems like the hot food gets cold before I can finish..."

He said this not out of childish obstinance or rebellion, but rather because Col the wandering scholar had so rarely been given hot food to eat. It was pathetic to hear.

Lawrence put his hand on Col's back, and his back in turn felt small. "But in exchange, you get friends to eat with. Even if it's a little cooler, it's still just as tasty." He would never have spoken such words when he was just starting out as a merchant, but now they came with an ease that surprised even himself, without so much as a hint of pretension or embarrassment.

After all, once he had met Holo, mealtimes became more than an excuse to take in nourishment and became a time of happiness. Even when the food was cold and distasteful, eating it with a friend, with whom you could complain about the cold or the bad taste, was its own sort of pleasure.

Col seemed to have understood this. He nodded deeply, as though a rich and beautiful truth had been revealed to him.

"Anyway, just consider that there's nothing to lose in learning such things. After all, it was free," Lawrence said cheerfully, giving Col a sly smile.

"Right!" proclaimed Col. He trotted out of the tavern, following Elsa.

Col loved to study, so no doubt he was off to review what he had just learned. By contrast there was Holo, so deeply unamused by the proceedings that she remained at the table as Lawrence paid for the meal.

"You ought to teach him a thing or two yourself," said Lawrence. The copper coins he had received as change had a rabbit

seal on them, perhaps deliberately, given that they were used as payment for trivial jobs and could only command light fare.

As Lawrence tossed a coin playfully in the air, Holo snatched it away. "Hardly. I'm a mere beast, after all."

Lawrence was about to laugh this off as yet another jest, but then he noticed that beneath her hood her face was surprisingly dour. He shut his mouth.

"So long as he enjoys himself, I thought," said Holo. If she had been the type to force her ways onto others, not only would the village where she had maintained the wheat harvest for all those centuries never forgotten her, she most certainly would not have been driven away from it.

To live joyfully, freely—that was what was important to Holo. At a glance, it might seem as though she was willful and always wanted her own way, but at her core, she had an easygoing nature. Lawrence had no trouble imagining her napping among the swaying wheat stalks all day long. It would have been so very Holo-like, so delightfully peaceful.

But such was not the way of all things in the world.

"Col's at that age, you know. Learning itself is fun for him." Lawrence felt quite proud of himself for putting it so well, but Holo seemed to find the statement an unfair one. She sneered and smacked Lawrence's shoulder.

Once the pair exited the shop, they met up with the waiting Col and Elsa, who began to walk.

Their conversation wandered from one topic to the next, and even from behind, it was clear that they were having a lovely time.

"You look as though you've had your favorite toy taken from you," said Lawrence teasingly, at which Holo gave a childish nod. At her unexpected honestly, Lawrence grimaced and added, "If this is how you are with Col, I dare not imagine what would happen if I were taken, too."

It was a practically suicidal joke. Holo could choose any number of ways to come back at it. Eventually, she looked up and smiled a small, exasperated smile.

"I'm a wisewolf, you fool."

It seemed to Lawrence that she would be a bit more charming if she acted more like she was in this moment. He took her hand. It was warmer than usual.

The next morning, Lawrence awoke to the sound of a closing door.

He had been drifting back to consciousness up until that moment, so when he sat up he was not surprised to find there was no one else in the room.

If his slightly foggy memory could be trusted, Holo and the rest had again gone off to morning prayers.

Lawrence yawned and, for a moment, seriously considered going back to sleep. Despite the comparatively easy journey, they had of course camped on the way from Kerube to Lenos. Moreover, compared with the snowbound country of Winfiel or that snowy shack up in the mountains, this inn was the very lap of luxury.

Elsa seemed to share that opinion. Because it had been rather suddenly decided that she would stay with them, they had hastily arranged for a straw mattress to be brought in, but as far as Elsa was concerned, it was a grand indulgence.

"Not even the village elder sleeps on a bed so fine!" she had said with a sheepish smile. And the rapidity with which she had fallen asleep after lying down exceeded even the notoriously sound sleeper Holo, which proved the truth of Elsa's claim rather thoroughly. Elsa's soft snoring arose so quickly that Holo had sat up in annoyance, just to prove that it was not her.

Though she was strict with others and with herself, because such human aspects of Elsa remained made her very easy to become fond of, barring other conflicts of interest. The way she

interacted with Col, too, was very different from Holo's puppy-like indulgence of him and similarly different from Fran's danger appeal.

So Holo had probably gone along with them to the morning prayers simply to protect her territory. She might claim that she did not care to whom Col became attached, but from her stiff facial expressions, it was easy to imagine.

The more she acted like the wisewolf she was, the more amusing she became.

Considering all that, Lawrence felt a little pleased and proud of himself since she had revealed her true feelings to him alone. If she caught on that he had realized this, she would tease him mercilessly as backlash, but fortunately, he was the only one in the room. Lawrence smiled and yawned, cracked his neck, and got out of bed.

Although they had received most necessities from Hugues back in Kerube, there were a few things that needed to be prepared. He needed to go to the stable and check on the state of his other companion there, and there were food and fuel provisions that needed to be bought for the next leg of the journey.

If the shops were selling freely there would be no problems, but if he was unlucky and there had been a rush of customers, there was the possibility of waiting days for his orders to be filled.

Given that the inns were all filled, that unlucky prospect bore consideration. If it came to that, his quickness as a traveling merchant would be a virtue. He finished his preparations, informed the innkeeper of his plans, then went out into the town.

Lawrence realized it had been some time since he had ventured out early on his own to lay in supplies. Perhaps thanks to the fine weather, his body felt light and his heart excited.

But he knew that even as the sun rose, it would also set. It was nice to be alone, but only when one was not truly alone.

Lawrence set out onto the streets. The breath fog from people walking merrily along rose as he went, illuminated by the morning sun.

When Lawrence came to the marketplace, it was crowded even before he entered it.

There were mules loaded heavily with green, frost-resistant vegetables, and men carrying barrels full of vinegar so strong it made the eyes water. There was a cart filled with rock salt that was accompanied by armed guards and which bore the seal and standard of some nobleman. Lawrence did not know if it was meant for this marketplace or on its way somewhere else, but it was amusing to watch sharp-eyed youngsters be chased off by the guards like so many flies. Perhaps they were trying to pick up any bits of salt that fell to the ground and turn them into a bit of spending money.

If such a heavy guard was necessary, then the profit from sneaking salt as false stone statues must have been sizable. Lawrence thought of Eve, who had sneaked right out of town one night and was now surely doing business somewhere in the south. He found himself less envious than simply astonished.

Such thoughts occupied his mind as he wandered the marketplace, inhaling the myriad scents that wafted from the stalls as he walked by each one. If there was this much in the market, buying what he needed ought nary be a trouble.

He passed barrels filled with carp, which splashed water up as they swam vigorously about, and arrived at a cheese monger's shop, with cheeses lined up for display. Cheese did not spoil quickly, and it was filling. And there was another way to eat it, he had learned long ago, that he would remember until the end of his days.

The cheese was put to the flame, melted as though one was

boiling water. Then bread or anything else could be dipped generously in it and eaten.

It was originally a dish from the south, but the colder the weather the more magnificent it became. Lawrence got excited just thinking about how enthusiastic he imagined Holo and Col would be to try it.

As he imagined the scene, Lawrence became aware of the shopkeeper's appraising eye on him. The man was placing a large, square-carved stone on one side of a great set of scales.

Lawrence rubbed his face as though blaming the cold, then erased the smile from his face and raised his voice. "I'd like a wheel of cheese! How much?"

Given the number of foreign travelers, the shop did not bother with anything that indicated prices. Moreover, at Lawrence's question, the thin shopkeeper—who looked more like a shepherd than a cheese monger—only continued to look at Lawrence curiously.

"That one, for example," said Lawrence, indicating the large wheel about to be weighed. The shopkeeper's apprentice also awaited the master's orders, his face red from effort as he manhandled said wheel.

"Ah...I suppose you arrived yesterday or today, eh?" replied the shopkeeper finally, like an old man who was hard of hearing. He then gave his apprentice the signal to put the cheese on the scale.

A baker's scale was big enough, but the balance beam on this one was even thicker. The chains, too, were free of any ornamentation at all—it was a very utilitarian device, and it clanked loudly when the cheese was loaded onto it.

"I arrived the day before last. Heading even farther north." Lawrence swallowed back anything else he might have said after that, as the shopkeeper suddenly looked over his shoulder and reached for an iron rod. At the end of the rod was a small plaque,

with writing carved into it. Standing on tiptoe and looking farther into the shop, he could see the box into which the plaque end of the iron rod had been thrust.

Within the box smoldered charcoal, which heated the brand such that it could mark the cheese.

"I see. Bad luck, then." There was a hissing sound, and soon the fragrant smell of charring cheese hit Lawrence's nose. "It's not neglect that there are no prices out. These have all sold." Lawrence barely had time to make a sound of surprise before the man continued, "That one, this one, and this one here, too, are all being taken away today. It's good to have the rush in business, but it's dizzying, too. And I've got to endure the sad faces of all the unlucky travelers, too."

Lawrence did not put his hand to his face, instead managing a chagrined smile that was still probably rather pathetic. "Well, it's nice that business is good." Even a few weeks before, the trouble with the furs, the aftermath of the cancellation of the northern campaign, and the heavy taxes would have all but stagnated the marketplace.

"Aye...the business came back all of a sudden, truly. I suppose it's something like the weather. When it's nice out, people come and shop. Don't you think?"

A merchant who dealt in something that kept so well as cheese did could surely live a well-kept, easy life. The fact that he seemed a bit musty was due in part to Lawrence's own youth.

"I quite agree. Incidentally, is tomorrow's cheese also spoken for? Or the day after's?" Lawrence asked, at which the shopkeeper nodded heavily. The queue was apparently very long indeed.

Lawrence scratched his head in consternation, and the shopkeeper pretended to ignore his predicament. "Our cheese goes well with wine, though. The taverns keep quite a stock on hand."

"Huh?" Lawrence looked back at the shopkeeper in surprise,

but the shopkeep was already pretending Lawrence was not there, instead busily giving orders to his apprentice.

Though he could not say so openly, the shopkeeper had essentially told Lawrence that if he went to a tavern, they might spare him some cheese there.

A town separated its specialties, such that the cheese monger sold cheese and the tavern sold wine. The cheese monger could not operate as a drinking establishment, nor was the tavern allowed to sell cheese in quantity.

But there were always exceptions to the rules.

Apparently this shopkeeper was of an accommodating disposition.

"My thanks to you. I'll give that a try this evening, then," said Lawrence.

"Aye, you do that. Oh, and—!" The shopkeeper called to Lawrence as the latter began to walk away. "It's going to be much the same for anything else you want to buy. Don't bother looking at the shops—it's the storehouses you'll want to peek in."

Lawrence found himself briefly lost in thought at these words, and he was soon carried off by the flow of people. The cheese monger was soon out of sight.

"It's the storehouses you'll want to peek in"—that was another thing that ought not to have been said out loud.

And just as the shopkeeper had said, Lawrence soon discovered that of all the goods he had hoped to find in the market, he could get none at all, or not enough, or else the only thing left were the scraps none of the other customers would buy.

And yet the prices were not so very high. What kept running through Lawrence's head was the earlier trouble in Lenos, with the furs.

The market was so busy it made a merchant like Lawrence

almost angry to be in it, so he left, making straight for a less-crowded street.

His destination was somewhere no proper merchant would be at this hour: the Beast and Fish Tail.

Before the Beast and Fish Tail's back door there stood a wagon, loaded with various crates and barrels—and counting them with visible irritation was none other than that same barmaid.

Despite her brusqueness, the boy minding the wagon was only too happy to answer her every question as she demanded this or that piece of information from him.

She was a marvelous witch of a girl. But could she hear the voice in his mind that said so?

Lawrence waited for her to finish purchasing what goods she needed, then picked a likely moment to approach. When the barmaid looked over her shoulder and noticed him, she was utterly unmoved. "Goodness, you're early today," she said, as though their exchange the prior day had never happened.

Or else she had given up on pushing and was going to try a pull instead.

"Quite. Haste can be a virtue, after all."

The girl scratched something into a wax-covered board, then looked up at him as though she were counting money given to her by a drunkard. Then she sighed. "So, what profit is it you're chasing this time, eh?"

It was obvious he was interrupting her work, but Lawrence kept his affable smile up and answered proudly. "Nothing like that. I was hoping you'd let me buy a little from you."

The barmaid's expression was the very epitome of a suspicious face. She raised one eyebrow, and the *Huh?* she was thinking to herself was entirely obvious. "If taverns start selling goods, the

town would be in chaos. Why not go to the marketplace? I'm a little busy here."

Having finished her count, the girl tucked the board under her arm and poked her head through the back door, shouting something into the tavern. She certainly was not going to bring all these goods inside herself, so perhaps she was calling for the master of the shop.

"I'm sure you are, if you're planning to use all of this in your cooking."

She kept her head impudently in the doorway, with her nicely shaped rear facing the street. If she had had a rabbit tail, it would surely have been twitching.

The barmaid finally turned to regard him, a look of frustration on her face. "These are extra supplies, in case of hardship."

"I'll bet they are," said Lawrence with a smile. The barmaid averted her gaze and scratched her head. She was obviously unsure what to do. "I'll pay in cash. Gold coin, if you like. Or"—he offered the choice he would give in any normal business transaction—"would smaller coins be better?"

The girl finally sighed. "I see," she said. "I see how it is. As soon as you figured things out, you came straight here. Where'd you get that idea, I wonder?" She looked up at the sky as though she had dropped her coin purse somewhere, hands on her hips, eyes closed.

Every one of her exaggerated gestures was deeply amusing. If she quit her job at the tavern, she could surely find work as a dancing girl.

"The value of coin is rising, isn't it?"

The girl nodded at Lawrence's words. "But these truly are emergency supplies."

Lawrence briefly greeted the shopkeeper, whose head had just emerged from the doorway. "I'm sure they are," he said.

* * *

Only very recently, the town had been in chaos.

Regardless of how accustomed the residents were becoming to such conditions, its effects were unmistakably lingering—especially when it came to trade.

Just yesterday, Lawrence had been reminded of when he and Holo had first come to this town and been swept up in the fallen noblewoman and brilliant merchant Eve's fur-trading schemes.

The city had then decided that, in exchange for selling furs to foreign traders, they would accept only cash.

Furs were much more profitable to sell after being processed and turned into clothing, rather than as a raw commodity. Thus, the craftsmen who made their living by the processing of fur had absolutely no desire to sell their furs to outside traders.

But it would have been difficult for the city to outright ban the sale of furs to foreign merchants. In the worst case, there could be violent rebellion on the part of those merchants. So using the Church, they required that all business be conducted in cash. Since no one traveled long distances carrying large amounts of coin, this seemed like a splendid plan. There was no ban on sales, but there was simply nothing to purchase with.

It was thought that this would settle everything, but the Church that handed down this decision added another condition that made things complicated.

The Church had its own coffers, which were always full of money. And in order to solidify their power base, they sought someone through whom they could lend money to the outside. And thus did they loan a large amount of money to the foreign merchants.

The furs were bought up by the foreign merchants, and the enraged craftsmen rioted.

That was about the end of the story, but such disturbances always leave their claw marks behind.

The consequences here were that, since the merchants had bought up the furs and fled, the town's money was now concentrated in the hands of a very few.

And whenever there was such concentration, instability came with it.

In this case, the value of the currency shot up.

"Since the riot, it's like the money's dried up from the town. There's no money anywhere you go. It vanished like smoke. Even if you allow that many trades happen on credit, you still need small coins. We're in real trouble," said the barmaid, as they talked in the tavern's cellar.

Its walls were lined with all the things Lawrence had been unable to buy in the marketplace.

"They say anything scarce becomes dear," said Lawrence.

"There's too much cash in the hands of the fur dealers. But because coin shortage is a problem for any town, it's not as though we can import some coppers. And now, even a dull copper is starting to look as brilliant as any gold."

During times of cash-only business, the clever ones would bet that the value of currency would eventually fall to its former levels, but while it was high, they would buy as many goods as they could.

And that was why the marketplace's condition was as strange as it was.

"And as a tavern, you can easily avoid any accusations that you're speculating. Very clever."

Lawrence wrote his prices on a wooden slate and handed it over. The barmaid wrinkled her nose and rewrote all the figures.

"Too high," said Lawrence.

"Feel free to try your luck in the marketplace." Constantly dealing as she did with so many drunken patrons, the girl was tougher than any grizzled merchant. Her position was strong—they had no need to sell Lawrence anything.

"Understood. But I'll be expecting quality."

"Heh. That's a compromise I can make."

Given the satisfied way she looked at the slate, it was all too clear how cheaply the tavern had originally obtained the goods. There was no winning against an opponent with cunning, capital, and nerve.

"Still, I'm a bit surprised," said the girl.

"Oh?"

"That you'd come alone."

"I've come alone more times than not."

The girl put her index finger to her chin. "I suppose that's true," she murmured.

"My companion told me not to think that a jewel can shine alone, though."

Hearing these words, the barmaid's smile was as bright as any gem. "So, will the next few days be all right?"

"Yes, if you please."

"And it would be best if you could take delivery in the morning, although not too early. We're a tavern, after all."

The girl seemed like the sort who rose with the dawn and immediately got to work, but there was a certain charm to the idea of her lolling lazily about in bed for a while, too.

"Understood. Not too late, not too early."

"Timing is of the essence, after all."

Lawrence mused that he had heard those words an awful lot recently, and then realized there was one more thing he had meant to ask.

"Has the letter come yet?"

"Speaking of timing, no, not yet. If it's urgent, I'll have it sent to your inn once it arrives."

"If you please," said Lawrence and took his leave of the girl.

She deliberately betrayed no particular regret at parting, not

even looking at Lawrence. Instead, she vaguely waved the slate in his general direction.

Though traveling merchants made their living amid hellos and good-byes, they could not hold a candle to those who worked in taverns. The world was a big place, and there was always a bigger fish.

"Well, then," murmured Lawrence to himself. This had all taken longer than he had expected. He considered going to the stables, but then Holo's hungry, displeased face flashed across his mind. He sighed and decided to hurry back to the inn.

He got his bearings and headed down an alley in order to avoid the crowded streets. He wound up having to press himself against a wall in order to let by some women carrying full baskets on their heads. In place of offering thanks, they gave him large smiles.

Perhaps the barmaid at the Beast and Fish Tail was not so bewitching after all—perhaps it was just the custom in Lenos. He thought about it as he made his way down the narrow alley, when he suddenly emerged onto a slightly broader street.

Directly in front of him was a very familiar building.

"So he really is out of business, eh?" It was old Arold's inn, at which Lawrence and Holo had stayed the last time they were in Lenos. Currently, its master headed south on a pilgrimage.

Originally it had been a busy tannery, but circumstances had forced it closed, and it had become an inn. The dormitories for the many apprentices had become rooms for travelers to stay in.

The permission to run the inn had been transferred to the Delink Company, who had held Holo as collateral, but Lawrence could hardly imagine them opening an inn. Once they sold the permit to someone else, they would probably sell the building itself.

The building must have seen many faces within its walls, but now it was silent, expressionless, like some cast-off shell.

Perhaps that was why.

Lawrence put on an obstinate expression and grinned wryly at no one. He was imagining himself opening up some small shop there. Nothing as big as Philon's general store, but perhaps a business serving road-weary travelers for whom the journey itself was home.

And taking care of the quietly thriving little shop would be him and one other.

"...How absurd."

Lawrence chuckled in self-reproach, then sighed a long-suffering sigh. It would surely be a mistake to imagine that he would be the only one who would be sentimental about the approaching end of their journey. Holo was thinking many of the same things, no doubt, but showing them less obviously in her manner and words.

Even so, if he continued his idling much longer, he would certainly risk her ire. And given that her nose was keener than any hound's, he would need to put a tight lid on anything that stank of sentimentality. Lawrence let his weakness go as though kicking the dust from his feet and resolved to put this inn behind him.

What stopped him in his tracks was the emergence of someone from the inn, which he had assumed to be deserted.

"Huh?" said the figure who stepped out of the inn, looking at Lawrence.

—which was probably Lawrence's imagination, but the figure did indeed make a face of surprise, although his mouth moved just slightly.

Lawrence himself was just as shocked. The man who had stepped out of the inn was one of the four masters of the Delink

Company. If Lawrence recalled correctly, his name was Luz Eringin.

"So will that all be quite all right?"

From across the way, Lawrence could hear that same slithering, serpentine voice, but it was not directed at him.

Eringin looked over his shoulder and addressed the others who were following him out of the building.

"Yes, yes. Though the remaining goods will need to be inspected."

"I was told by the former owner that they could be disposed of."

"No, that won't do at all. They were probably used for smuggling. We'll consider disposal after they've been inspected."

Given the contents of the conversation, they were probably town officials, perhaps conducting the many verifications that were involved in the transfer of a permit.

"Will sir come by the trading company later? If you've time, I've just taken delivery of a fine vintage...," came the invitation from one of the officials.

Everyone wanted to earn the gratitude of a town official, but those officials only cared about the gratitude of men like Eringin.

It spoke of Eringin's position of strength in this town that he declined the invitation with a slight wave. "No, I really must return to my own company. I've got an engagement to attend to, so if you'll excuse me."

These last words were delivered while Eringin looked at Lawrence.

The official noticed this, of course, and also looked in Lawrence's direction, but expressed little interest in him. "Well, then," he said with a bow and walked off.

Eringin only spoke again once the official had rounded a distant corner and gone out of sight. "Well, Mr. Kraft Lawrence! I thought it'd be quite a while before I saw you again."

"And here I was sad to think the day would never come at all."

Eve might one day make a triumphant return, attended by underlings who, like Eringin, were accomplished in their own right. But given his own disposition, Lawrence knew he himself would never be such a one.

"Heh. Not every successful man is an ambitious one."

"I'd welcome such good fortune."

At Lawrence's words, Eringin briefly flashed the smile of a kindly old man, then cocked his head. "Well, men such as us must treasure our connections. If you've time, do come visit the company. We've got a fine vintage on hand." They were the same words the official earlier had used. His smile turned ferocious, eyes angular and glittering as though set in polished gold. "Well, I'll be off, then," he said and began to walk away.

He was dressed in the finest clothing: a long-sleeved coat, a warm-looking fur muffler, and even lightweight leather boots.

It was strange to see a man dressed as he was walking around without any attendants, but considering Eringin's business, that lonely-yet-opulent bearing suited him perfectly.

"I could never manage it."

There was not time enough in the world to count all the stories of brave, unyielding men who nonetheless could not defeat their loneliness.

Even Holo was no exception to that rule.

Those who attained the highest levels of achievement were the only ones who defeated it. In that sense, Lawrence had to afford Eringin a certain amount of respect as he watched the man walk away.

"Now, then," said Lawrence, as he began to walk—only to suddenly look over his shoulder.

He had the feeling that someone had suddenly ducked out of sight in the corner of his vision.

Lawrence took a long look at the mostly deserted street, but

saw no one spying on him. He decided it was his imagination and walked back to the inn.

Upon returning, he found that it had not been his imagination and that Holo was most displeased.

Lunch was cheese over rye bread, with a small amount of boiled beans atop it.

It was simple fare that seemed likely to accompany a book on religious travel, but given that it brought an end to several straight days of Holo being able to eat her fill, she found it unacceptable.

Evidently, Elsa had taken the lead and ordered it when the innkeeper had come to check on them.

"Such food isn't nearly enough!" Holo's angry shout was, fortunately, covered up by the noisy clatter of a passing wagon, but that did nothing to erase her anger.

Her hood was sharply pointed thanks to her pricked ears, and her overcoat billowed around her like a noblewoman's skirts.

"I'm not sure eating luxurious food every day is such a good thing," said Lawrence, earning himself an immediate and sharp glare from Holo.

"Oh, so you're going to lecture me on this point as well, eh?"

"...I get it, I get it. Don't be so angry."

Holo seemed to have more to say on the matter but simply harrumphed and turned around.

Fran had been a mercenary chaplain who had taught of God with the scriptures in her hand, but her goal had not been to save anyone's soul; rather, it was to deliver last rites. Chaplains, who borrowed God's name to do their work, were often called by another name: reapers. Her teachings were meant very specifically for the battlefield.

Meanwhile, Elsa lived a thoroughly pure life by God's teachings.

For Col, whose goal was to learn Church law but whose studies

had come to a halt because of a lack of funds, it had been an opportunity he would never have dared wish for. Lawrence felt it was altogether a good and proper thing for Col to learn as much as he could from her.

And then there was Holo, who herself was well aware of that fact. While she had made every effort to hand down a bit of her wisewolf's dignity to Col, even if she had not, she still would have had no desire to trample on his thirst for knowledge in this situation.

The result was that she could do nothing but watch, and ever since morning prayers had ended, she had simply followed along with Col as Elsa delivered her lessons.

While she could bare her fangs and give the barmaid at the Beast and Fish Tail a good challenge, it was hard to do the same toward someone like Elsa. Elsa had no particular designs on Col, and no matter how Holo might snarl, she was the only one trying to compete.

For the proud wisewolf, it was an unbearably foolish position to suffer. And so she vented her frustration upon Lawrence.

"She just loves to flaunt all her so-called knowledge, lecturing Col on this and that all the way to the church and all the way back. And who was it that saved that village, hmm? It was me!" Holo grumbled, going on and on about every little thing that irritated her as it happened to come to mind.

Lawrence gave vague, noncommittal replies as he gazed out onto the town.

"And that's not the only part of my territory she's ruined! This is all because you said you'd put her up in our room! Are you even listening to me?" She stood on her toes, her face so close and so angry that Lawrence wondered if she were going to bite his nose.

Lawrence flinched away as he answered. "I'm listening," he

said and was about to continue, but found himself at a loss for words and so gave up.

No matter what angle he might try to take, he was well aware that it would only serve to rile her up further. For once, Holo was genuinely furious beyond the means of logic or sense to assuage.

Her darling Col was being instructed by another woman. And whatever had been bothering him ever since Kerube, he had not confided in Holo about it. The previous morning he had begged Holo to let him go to morning prayers, and for some reason, on the way back his worries seemed to have lifted.

Holo, of course, had been honestly pleased that this was so. She herself seemed to feel that the approach of the journey's end was cause for happiness, but in point of fact was rather jealous of Col's attention.

So while he certainly understood her irrational anger at the intrusion of Elsa, looking at Holo, Lawrence could not help but smile.

"Is something amusing to you?" she demanded with fangs flashing keenly; depending on his answer, he would be spared no mercy.

Until just recently—and certainly when they had first met—Lawrence would have erased his smile and immediately betrayed his fear of her. But nowadays, he was able to meet even this mannerism with utter calm.

"Oh yes, quite amusing," said Lawrence, taking Holo's hand and pulling her out of the way of a wagon she was about to bump into. "I never thought I would see a wisewolf rage like this."

Holo tried to snatch her hand away from Lawrence's grasp, but Lawrence strengthened his grip slightly, so she was unsuccessful.

"Come now, don't be so angry."

His words were like oil on a fire, and Holo only pulled away harder, acting like a child throwing a tantrum.

Just as she was about to actually bite his hand, Lawrence let go

and placed his now-empty hand on her head. "I wasn't making fun of you."

Holo brushed his hand away and glared at him, but Lawrence only repeated himself.

"I wasn't making fun of you."

The street finally arrived at the port district of the town, and the field of view was suddenly much broader.

The sailors and dockworkers seemed to be taking a post-meal break as they sat around the piles of unloaded goods and chattered good-naturedly.

"So what, then?" Holo's displeasure now seemed forced, as though she had lost track of what exactly it was she was so angry about. Either that, or she had never really known in the first place.

There was, of course, the anger she had over feeling that Col was being taken from her. But previously, such a thing would never have made her so angry, as though she had had a favorite apple snatched out of her grasp. If Col's attention had been stolen from her, she would first have accepted that reality, then taken logical, appropriate action given the entirety of the situation. And if, after all her efforts, Col did not come back to her, she would allow for that outcome and give up.

That would have been worthy of the name Wisewolf and be the sort of action one who had perfected the noble way of the traveler would take.

This was not baseless speculation, either. The very reason Lawrence was able to travel with Holo was regardless of how clumsy or foolish it made him look, he had always reached his hand out to her.

In her relationships with others, Holo always drew away first. She did it because she mistook it for the smart, noble thing to do, and because she insisted that it had served her well thus far—even though she hated being alone.

In her interactions with Lawrence, though, Holo had stopped wearing that mask.

"I just thought it might be nice for you not to act the wisewolf," said Lawrence, gazing out at the port. Holo looked wordlessly up at him.

But her silence was not because she did not understand what he was saying—rather, it was a look of shock that her secret had somehow been exposed.

"Though it is a bit silly of you to be so worked up over worries that your dear Col might be taken from you," Lawrence added.

At this, Holo seemed to find a solid reason to be angry, and she turned away, pouting. Yet as ever, her ears and tail were more eloquent than her tongue.

Lawrence said exactly what he was thinking. "The truth is, you want to be even more selfish, don't you?"

Holo was proud. And being proud, she was very stubborn about her position, her role. While she had hated being revered as a god, if she received no praise at all, the truth might well have been that her loneliness would crush her. Whatever she might say, Holo was a kind and serious wolf, who wished to live up to the expectations of others.

That was why, even after being faced by open hostility from the villagers she had aided through the centuries, she never once bared her fangs at them.

She was kind and responsible. And she hated being lonely.

Though she was pathetically trapped in a cage of her own construction, there was no personality that could have suited her better.

"No one would think less of you for being envious or for showing that childish attachment. This isn't your wheat fields. Nobody here is worshipping you." Lawrence paused for a moment before continuing. "You don't need to force yourself to simply endure

things anymore. At the very least, I'm not thinking of you as some kind of god."

It was late to say so, given how many times by now he had seen her pathetic, awkward sides.

But even saying so, he knew that her habits and ideals would not change easily after so much time. Still, after so many misadventures with Lawrence, she had finally opened up to him, at least.

There was little he could do for her. But at the very least, Lawrence wanted to give her the push she needed to take that first step.

"So why don't you stop taking out on me the frustration of enduring all that alone, and just be a little more honest? I feel like that's more of what a wisewolf would do—"

He had originally meant it as a bit of a joke, but the moment he looked over at Holo, his mouth stopped moving.

Holo had pulled her hood down over her eyes. Her head was downcast, her shoulders drawn in.

"Ah..."

Holo was stubborn and proud, but for all that, her heart was quite soft and fragile. Everything Lawrence had just said, she had surely thought to herself hundreds of times. What if she had just wanted to vent her frustration at Lawrence?

His logic would have had the precise opposite of its intended effect. He would have hurt her instead of helped her.

Lawrence's mouth opened and closed, but no words came.

Holo's feet suddenly stopped in their tracks, and a cold sweat dripped down Lawrence's back.

People around them were watching.

Holding in his arms his great bundle of regrets, Lawrence dared come around in front of Holo and look under her hood—past the chestnut brown hair in its shadow.

Holo was drawn inward and her shoulders trembled, and beneath her hood, she seemed to be waiting for Lawrence uneasily.

"After all that talk, this is all it takes to fluster you? You're rather full of yourself," said Holo.

Even if he could endure her anger, her tears were hard to bear. He knew he had that in common with many of the men of the world, and when Holo was unhappy with something, she was merciless in her exploitation of it.

"Hmph," she said, pushing Lawrence aside and starting to walk. The careless, foolish traveling merchant had no choice but to follow after her. "I hardly need you to tell me such things. I'm perfectly aware of them."

Lawrence swallowed the retort that came immediately to mind, but could not quite help from saying something. "...If so—"

"If so?" Holo stopped again and turned to face him. When Lawrence's words stuck in his throat, Holo continued, closing in on him. "If so, I ought to just act as I wish, you say? Just throw all my pride and wisdom as a wisewolf aside?"

Her tone from under her hood was a challenging one, and the irises of her eyes were as red as the reddest, thickest wine.

"I have my own things to consider, in my own way. But I'm not so clever as that. You want me to be honest here, polite there, but I simply cannot. And anyway," she said, clasping her hands together behind her and looking off, "you're only asking what would be most convenient for *you*."

"—!"

Anger shot down Lawrence's throat, as though he had swallowed something hot.

He had had no intention of speaking out of turn or saying too much. If Holo's attempts to act as a wisewolf should act were causing her suffering or making her angry, then she ought to discard the role. That was what he truly thought, and it had nothing to do with what was convenient for him.

"You know that's not true," he said.

Holo looked over her shoulder at him, those red-tinged amber eyes of hers taking a good, long look. They were not joking, nor teasing—but neither conceding defeat, nor full of suspicion. "Truly?"

So her words were his confirmation.

"Truly," Lawrence answered, and Holo looked at him as though she were staring right into his heart.

Holo closed the lids over her large eyes and made an innocent expression that looked almost sleepy.

Evidently to close your opponent's mouth, you needed only to close your own eyes. The moment that truth came to Lawrence, Holo's eyes opened and she suddenly smiled. "You are quite daring, though," she said.

"Huh?"

"Telling me to be more honest. Here and now, of all places." Holo looked smoothly ahead and smiled a genuinely amused smile. "You may as well have just set me upon them like a dog." Her eyes glittered maliciously.

"Ah—" It was all too easy for Lawrence to imagine Holo cutting in between the seriously lecturing Elsa and the passionately studying Col. "N-no, that's not what I—"

"So what *did* you mean?"

Lawrence was at a loss for words. He rubbed his forehead with his hand.

He wanted Holo to be honest. He wanted her to stop forcing herself to wear a mask. But the idea of her acting without any restraint at all made his stomach hurt. He could hardly blame her for taking his words to mean he wanted her to act however was most convenient for him.

But why had he even bothered trying to tell her not to force herself to do things? Lawrence thought about it and finally settled on an answer.

"...If I must choose between you doing whatever you wish or forcing yourself to simply endure, then..." He took a breath. "I'd rather the former."

Immediately, Holo's nails dug into the palm of Lawrence's hand. "You're being tricky with your words again."

She never overlooked such things.

Lawrence furrowed his brow, then soon gave up. If he did not say it, she would never forgive him. He looked down at her, exhausted. "I think you're much more charming when you're honest and free to do as you like."

Holo grinned. She was obviously enjoying his embarrassed face much more than his actual words.

"I think *you're* much more charming when you're forcing yourself." Her nose crinkled.

"I suppose I can't beat an honorable wisewolf."

"Heh." Holo smiled and faced forward. Her footsteps were light. "You're the one at fault for this, you know," she murmured.

"Huh?"

Holo's red-amber eyes flashed at Lawrence, and she looked at him as though relishing her own mischief. "No matter what happens after this, I'll be to blame for none of it."

Lawrence tried to reply, but a chill ran down his spine. "Wait..."

Holo giggled. "'Twas a jest, you fool!" She began to stride delightedly away. After Lawrence stumbled in his hurry to follow her, she continued. "Still, 'tis well for once, in such a long life, not to be thinking on past and future."

She flashed her fangs in a charming grin.

CHAPTER THREE



Finally visiting his old partner in the stables, Lawrence stood in front of the home.

At first, the horse had stuck his nose irritably into the barrel of fodder. But then, slowly, he had raised his head, regarding Lawrence with large black eyes—only to snort petulantly.

"He's done splendidly. And eaten enough for that, to be sure," said the stable master with a proud smile, almost as though he were talking about his own horse.

Horses were not cheap. If Lawrence had to leave his in the care of another, it was good that he was being treated as one of the stable master's own.

"Quite, and I'm always having to bargain with him over how much I have to feed him to get him to walk a few more steps."

"I see. So you get plenty of negotiation practice while out on the road, eh?" In the cold season, a sunny afternoon like this one put everyone in high spirits.

After both men laughed at the joke, Lawrence mentioned that he expected to be leaving in the next few days, and thus asked that the stable master not rent his horse out to anyone else. "And there's no need to let him eat too much."

"Ah, so you'll have a better place to bargain from on your last day, eh?"

Whether it was just a joke, or a shield to guard against a surprise jab, or (most likely) both, Lawrence laughed and waved his hand lightly. "I'll leave him to you for the next few days."

"It's always a pleasure to take care of a fine horse."

In the time Lawrence was talking to the stable master, several other people had come and gone looking to rent a horse or leave theirs for a day. Most of them seemed to be known to the stable master, and the apprentices treated them with familiarity. In most shops, the owner dealt only with the regulars, leaving the first-time customers to his apprentices, but a stable was just the opposite. During a journey, one literally entrusted one's life to a horse, so the stable master had to treat first-time customers with the utmost seriousness. Once trust was established, they would come back.

And just as goods varied from region to region, so did practices from trade to trade.

"I suppose that's most of the major preparations, then," said Lawrence as he ticked them off his fingers. Holo had turned away from the horse as he spoke to face Lawrence. Normally her view of the animal was from the driver's seat, so perhaps it was novel for her to regard him from the front.

The horse, too, seemed to have an opinion on Holo, and the two had regarded each other for a moment.

The stable master had laughed and said that the two seemed to be having some sort of conversation—and perhaps they had. Once Holo had finally stepped back from the horse, Lawrence asked.

"Talking about the state of the world with him, were you?"

"Mm? Oh, aye. We've both been put up as collateral before, so we were simply commiserating."

When a traveling merchant's tool broke, it was fixed and reused until it was so worn down there was nothing left. Food was eaten crusty and moldy until it simply could not be kept down.

And in Holo's case, when she bore even a single grudge, she would complain about it a hundred times. Moreover, most of her grudges were not even real grudges.

Lawrence made an exasperated face, at which Holo happily took his arm. She was in good spirits, as though the trouble with Col had been forgotten.

"So, what next? Foodstuffs, mayhaps?"

"I've already taken care of our food. All that's left is fuel, money changing, and perhaps I ought to have my knife sharpened. Anyway, there's nothing left of much interest to you."

Lawrence had expected her to make a theatrically bored face, but she did not seem particularly bothered. He had thought she would be angry about the food, but she let it pass.

Of course, even without laying in extra provisions, the wagon bed was already full of all sorts of tasty treats. If he had been using his own wagon and horse, his old partner would probably take one look at the load and neigh an exhausted neigh—*My master's got a swollen head again!*

"Still, I think it might be better to wait on fuel and money changing until the map arrives, and we know exactly where we're going. What say you?"

"Mm? Mm. I was thinking of wandering about a bit just to kill some time, but...," said Holo, her amber eyes then fixing upon Lawrence with alarming speed, "let's return to the inn and prepare for another battle!"

Even knowing she was deliberately trying to get a rise out of him, Lawrence was not sure how much of that was a joke. Elsa seemed like she could be counted upon to be reasonable, but if provoked by Holo, her stubbornness might well flare up.

Holo's expression quickly returned to placidity. Perhaps she regretted having said too much.

Lawrence saw this and decided to leave well enough alone. This, in turn, made him wonder if he was not a little sick himself.

In any case, he thought he might speak to Col before this got out of hand. As the notion occurred to him, Holo stood on tiptoe and grabbed hold of his ear. "Are you thinking of interfering in what I've set my mind to, hmm?"

It seemed that wolves could be surprisingly persistent.

They returned to the inn, with Lawrence following Holo up the stairs. As they ascended, Lawrence caught a glimpse of her tail from under her cloak. This always happened whenever she was excited or in high spirits. In her giant wolf form she might have been able to hide it, but in this small body it was terribly clear. She hopped up the last step, and Lawrence sighed a tired sigh.

He did not believe anything he had thought or said was mistaken, and yet still he felt uncertain. That might have been Holo's aim, but in any case, Elsa did give off a stubborn impression, which frightened him.

Or was it that from the outside, his and Holo's relationship really did seem so tenuous? He had learned from his business that it was dangerous to ever consider one's own position as one safe from danger.

His arms folded in thought, Lawrence walked down the hallway as he considered these things. Holo skipped on ahead and put her hand to the room's door.

It was then that the delighted expression on her face suddenly vanished.

"What's wrong?" Lawrence asked, just as a voice called up from downstairs.

"Mr. Lawrence!"

He looked back and saw that it was Le Roi.

Holo looked to Lawrence with a face as though she had had cold water dumped on her head, but Lawrence held up his hand to stop her complaint. "Please come alone" was written all over Le Roi's face.

"Go on in without me."

Holo's perception was just as good as any experienced merchant's, so while she was obviously dissatisfied with the situation, she finally nodded her agreement. "Make it quick," was all she said, as she did an about-face.

There was no question in her eyes, no sense of "Will you be all right on your own?" Perhaps her head was simply filled with thoughts of Elsa and Col, or perhaps she had come to trust him at least a little bit. Lawrence considered this as he descended the stairs.

Le Roi removed his hat apologetically and bowed.

Lawrence heard the door to his room close—a sound that struck him with loneliness—then addressed Le Roi. "What might be the matter?"

"Yes, well, it's no great thing...," he said, only to point farther downstairs. Evidently, he wanted to speak in the inn's tavern.

Lawrence had no reason to refuse, so he followed the man. While Holo had made no sound at all as she had walked the stairs and hallways of the inn, the floor creaked with every one of Le Roi's steps.

Surely the reason most kings were fat was to increase the imposition of their appearance.

The time being what it was, when they reached the tavern on the first floor, there was hardly anybody there. Two men who had the look of travelers sat at seats near the entrance, sipping their wine disagreeably and discussing something in low voices.

Lawrence and Le Roi sat in the far corner of the tavern, as far away from the men as possible, and ordered two cups of wine.

The tavern master was so friendly as to be unpleasant. Le Roi looked back and forth between him and Lawrence three times, but asked nothing. Instead, he stared at the brimming cup of wine in front of him and, for the moment, remained still.

When Le Roi finally spoke, Lawrence had brought his cup to his lips three times.

"You have connections with the Delink Company, yes?"

Sitting at the table, Le Roi seemed shrunken in on himself, as though he expected to be scolded. His downcast face and pathetic, upturned eyes contrasted with the strangely accusing tone in his question.

If all of this was a calculated performance, he was a formidable man indeed. And Lawrence could only assume it was a performance.

If such a man got his teeth into him, there would be no escape. His pathetic display was perfect.

"Were you following me?" Lawrence asked, setting his cup down after a fourth sip and glancing over at the tavern keeper, who was writing something in a ledger.

After Lawrence had happened to encounter Luz Eringin in front of Arold's old inn, he had gotten the sense that someone was hiding in a corner of the street, watching. Assuming that had not been his imagination, it must have been Le Roi, who now sat in front of him.

"Yes. Well, Sir Eringin, actually."

Lawrence nodded but had absolutely no notion of how much he could trust this answer, given that he now knew that Le Roi was after the library that slumbered in the cellar beneath Elsa's church in Tereo.

Given that Lawrence had saved Tereo once before, it would not be at all surprising if Le Roi were trying to win him over, thinking to use him as a wedge to pry open Elsa's mouth.

"Might I ask why?"

At Lawrence's question, Le Roi swallowed. "I want to borrow money."

Lawrence was taken aback by the straightforward answer and looked evenly at Le Roi.

The man was clearly skilled at pacing a conversation. Lawrence found himself desperately wishing he had brought Holo along.

"I was following him around, hoping for some opportunity to approach him, when I happened to run into what I saw."

Lawrence set aside what Le Roi was saying and thought about something else. Le Roi wanted to ask him to introduce him to the Delink Company. "They're a troublesome lot, that company. Borrowing money from them, it's..."

That was as far as Lawrence got before Le Roi nodded his clear agreement. "I know. I've done occasional business in this town myself. I'm well aware of what sort of company they are."

Le Roi was, after all, someone who dealt with questionable people like Philon. Warning him was like delivering a sermon to a holy man.

And as Lawrence expected, Le Roi continued. "But that's the sort of company I want to borrow from, if I can."

"*That* sort of company?"

"Yes. The sort that doesn't care about politics, that's unmoved by faith. That pursues only profit. I can borrow only from such a place. Of course..." For the first time, Le Roi smiled an unpleasant smile and took a drink of wine.

There was no question this man had gone over his performance many times before, because it was as polished as a brass mirror.

"...if there's somewhere else that will lend me a thousand silver pieces with no questions asked, that's a different story."

Le Roi's eyes seemed very small, perhaps because his face was so large. At times the impression he gave off was like a small

defenseless animal, but now he looked like some sort of insect as it hunted its prey.

A thousand silver pieces was surely just a figure of speech. Given Le Roi's tone, Lawrence very much doubted whatever he had in mind would not be settled with a mere thousand pieces.

"It's true I'm passingly acquainted with the Delink Company, but I don't think they trust me so much that I could get them on board with anything suspicious..."

"I'll pay you three hundred *trenni*," said Le Roi, then closed his mouth tightly shut after the brief words.

Lawrence tried to respond, but finally no words came out from between his opened lips. He had the feeling that Le Roi would have a response ready for any of the objections that came readily to mind. He would have to—three hundred silver pieces was a lot of money.

Lawrence thought for a moment, then spoke. "I'm through risking my life for money." Just imagining what might ensue if he introduced somebody unreliable to the Delink Company and it happened to turn out badly made Lawrence depressed.

It was not a matter of how much money he was being offered.

He gave Le Roi his final-sounding answer, at which the crafty merchant immediately tried a different tactic. "I heard from Philon that you're heading north."

"—!" Lawrence looked up at the ceiling and knew that the battle was already over.

He brought his gaze slowly back down, and Le Roi wore the expression of a man who had placed a foolish bet and won anyway. "There's something the chain makers say. A chain can't be stronger than its weakest link."

That was why Le Roi had been waiting for Lawrence at this inn.

While Lawrence had been out with Holo, he had called on Elsa and Col and wheedled all the information out of them. Even if

they had been on their guard about what they said, they would have had no secrets from a man like Le Roi.

And in all likelihood, they had not been particularly guarded around him to begin with.

As though to prove it, Le Roi began to speak in a relaxed tone. "I'm quite sure that nice people with strong feelings about the northlands will be willing to lend more than a little aid in what I'm trying to do."

Such roundabout words were rarely used in business. They made him sound more like a rebel leader trying to rouse his men to defeat some great enemy.

Le Roi pulled his big hands out from beneath the table and folded them together on top of it. They looked like a big ball of dough ready for baking.

Lawrence realized he was already in the oven. He would have to be careful, otherwise he would wind up with his face red and swollen and full of regret.

"So what is it...you plan to buy with this money?"

This was surely the question Le Roi most wanted Lawrence to ask. It indicated that he was ready to engage in negotiations.

Le Roi smiled, the creases on his thick face deeply shadowed. "A forbidden book." The short words gave Lawrence a chill. "A forbidden book containing knowledge of banned arts. That's what I aim to buy."

The bookseller in front of him had dealings with Philon, a general store owner who supplied mercenaries. Moreover, he had had a relationship with a towering man like Father Franz and was very shrewdly trying to obtain his library. He was greedy, but honest in his greed.

Lawrence could not imagine this was a joke or a lie, or some boring scam.

"Alchemy, then?" Lawrence asked.

His eyes never leaving Lawrence, his opponent shook his thick head, indicating a negative. "A mining technique."

If this had been a game of cards, this would have been the card that rendered Lawrence's hand meaningless.

Le Roi continued. "I imagine it would be quite bad if the Debau Company got their hands on it first."

Lawrence had heard from time to time of revolutionary developments in the fields of shipbuilding and metallurgy. They turned common knowledge upside down and evidently made the impossible possible. If knowledge was a weapon, then they were like magic spells. With such knowledge, a tiny sardine could become a great shark.

Because of this, books containing such techniques and the knowledge of its practitioners were not always used, but instead sometimes hidden away or destroyed, Lawrence had heard. Because, while a crown always stayed on a king's head, knowledge was like puffs of wool on the wind and could go flying off anywhere.

When it came to mining techniques, which could be used by a select group of individuals to immediately realize vast profits, the tendency of such information to fly was even stronger.

Lawrence found it easy to doubt Le Roi.

But if it were true, and moreover if the information in the forbidden book was truly revolutionary, it could not be allowed into the hands of the Debau Company.

The only people in the northlands who would welcome such a development were the ones who preferred long-tasseled rugs and stone houses to bountiful forests and mountains.

And Holo wanted to nap in the sun of her homelands.

But Lawrence knew he could not act rashly. He reminded himself of that, then spoke. "Let's hear the details," he said.

* * *

"I look forward to your reply," said Le Roi before he left the inn, with a bow that made him look like a full wineskin being bent forcibly in half.

The only things left behind were two cups half-full of wine and Lawrence himself.

Now alone, Lawrence noticed the curious gaze of the tavern keeper on him, which he ignored, and looked up at the ceiling.

Having thought over Le Roi's proposition, he could not imagine it was a trap.

The river that passed through Lenos had two sources. One came from the Debau Company's base of power, and the other from the northeast region of Ploania. Le Roi claimed that there was a company in a town in that northeast region where the book currently was. It would have been foolish to bother asking, so Lawrence had not bothered inquiring as to the name of the town or the company.

Instead, he had asked how such a book had come to such a place.

Le Roi had simply answered, "There was an old abbey there."

There was an abbey that, after two centuries of history, was struck by lightning and burned to the ground. But upon hearing of its reputation for piety, a certain lord began construction of a new abbey. Thus, among the rubble of the old abbey was discovered the entrance to a cellar not even the abbot himself had known about, and from it was recovered a mountain of books. Most of them were written in ancient languages, and beginning with the lord's representative, none of the learned monks could understand them. Finally scholars were called from far and wide and asked for their appraisal, and in the end, most of the books were identified.

But even then a few remained mysteries, most of which were written in languages used by far-off desert kingdoms, and a few others were simply too old. Deciphering them required extreme effort, and the writing of the desert languages was worrisome. If, when translated, it turned out that the books contained something terrible, the abbey's reputation would sink into the earth.

Regardless of whether he was moved by such talk, the lord sold the volumes to book collectors in order to raise money for the reconstruction. And while the representative could not read them, he still copied the tiles down as best he could to create an index.

Some years later, the lord found himself in financial difficulties after giving a bit too much to the abbey and the Church. And a certain company thereupon made him a loan, taking some of his treasures as collateral. As the company sorted through each one, they came across the book in question. It had no value to the company, but a bookseller would know what it was worth.

And so they had sought the opinion of Le Roi.

The knowledge of the booksellers of the south far outstripped any scholar's. The scholars had to investigate every single line and word of the huge tome, but the merchants needed only the title and a brief summary. If the scholars knew the contents of a century's worth of books, the merchants knew the value of a millennium's.

Seeing the title of books he knew to be forbidden in the index, Le Roi immediately bought the index and began casting as wide a net as he could.

And then one of the volumes was caught.

Having survived because it was written in characters nobody could read, it described terrible techniques. But that was not unusual; such ignorance led to all sorts of mishaps—a cardinal

might hang a painting in his chambers, not realizing it was meant as a caricature of the pope.

Le Roi had said that he honestly did not know if the company that currently held the book had realized its true value. From his tone, it was clear that he desperately hoped this was true. And while Le Roi seemed like someone who got easily carried away, he was, in truth, a very practical thinker.

In other words, even if the company did not realize what they had, if Le Roi had figured it out, then it might not be long before someone else did, too.

The information had come to Le Roi via many other people, and any one of those people might let it slip that Le Roi was looking for that book. Any savvy merchant who heard that would conclude that something of interest was happening.

So long as nobody was looking for it, even gold by the roadside would go unnoticed. But once someone was looking for something, it would be found—even if it did not really exist.

Furthermore, Le Roi revealed that he had tried to borrow money from Philon. And Lawrence now knew why that had not worked.

Just as the Beast and Fish Tail had stored up goods as speculation, Philon had done the same thing. That was why Elsa could not spend the night there. He had bought up so much that not only were his storehouses full, but his living rooms as well, so he had no cash on hand with which to make a loan. And even if he had had such cash, he would have used it to buy more goods.

"Can't blame me for finding the story a little too perfect," Lawrence murmured to clear his head.

There was a time when he would not have hesitated to take three hundred pieces of silver simply to make an introduction to the Delink Company. But now he had reasons to stay behind at the table when Le Roi left and to hesitate to agree.

For one, there was no guarantee that Le Roi was not connected to the Debau Company. And even if he was not so connected, once he got his hands on the book, it might well have ill effects on the northlands simply by being sold at all.

Essentially, there were times when a book was better off staying on the shelves of some collector who failed to understand its contents.

But if Le Roi's prayers were in vain, and the company in question managed to obtain a translation of the book, what would happen if they realized the value of its contents? Such an outcome did not seem unthinkable, but nor was it necessarily bound to happen. If a book was favored for whatever reason, of course there would be curiosity about what it contained. If it had not been translated, then the likelier reason by far was that it had simply been at the end of a long line.

Which meant that, so long as Le Roi could be believed, Lawrence ought to help him as much as he could.

But that was not the only problem he faced.

If Lawrence were to introduce Le Roi to the Delink Company, he would then be vouching for Le Roi's trustworthiness. That was what an introduction was: the introducing party's guarantee that this person was trustworthy. If the person he introduced was scheming to swindle the Delink Company, the blame would fall on Lawrence, who had made the introduction. And he did not want to imagine what earning the ire of a company like that would mean.

If he got involved in this, he would need to watch Le Roi very closely to make sure the man did not do anything stupid. He might just take the money and run.

If it came to that, it was sure to take quite a bit of time to remedy.

At this juncture, Lawrence did not know which company in

which town held the book. But it was undoubtedly not a small company nor a small town, so he knew to narrow it down to larger towns. In which case, that could take well over ten days by horse-drawn wagon. Given the possibilities, it could take close to twenty days each way, if the destination were the capital of Ploania. It could end up wasting a month or even two months of his time.

By that time, the chill of winter would be beginning to thaw, and it would be the beginning of a new year.

The world would be starting to move again, with the snowmelt turning once more its waterwheels.

Lawrence was a traveling merchant who lived in the cycle of the seasons. He was no nobleman who could idle his time away, ignorant of the year. The trade route his master had passed down to him was artfully constructed to take exactly one year. He could afford this fool's errand to help Holo find her homeland of Yoitsu because it came during the winter, when the whole world slowed.

He wanted to throw everything away for Holo. But even so, it was a simple fact that he could not. Lawrence was a traveling merchant, and such a decision would not affect only him.

There was a village up in the mountain crags that barely made it through each winter—if Lawrence did not come, they would be forced to eat the moss off the very rocks. It was for such reasons that traveling merchants were needed in the world. For every month Lawrence delayed, they had to wait another month for him to bring them food.

That meant he had determined to part ways with Holo once Yoitsu lay before them.

"..."

Lawrence closed his eyes and thought things over again slowly and deliberately.

His promise to Holo was to take her to Yoitsu. Either that or to part ways with her with a smile.

It was not to protect her homeland from all possibility of danger. Holo herself knew that to be impossible.

Lawrence drained his cup with a sigh and stood.

"Once you hear, you want to do something about it"—such had been Hugues's position, although he had covered his ears to the Debau Company's schemes. If there was nothing one could do, ignorance was better for one's peace of mind.

That was certainly the truth.

Although the sound had not bothered him at all when he had walked up with Holo, now that he was alone, the creaking grated on his ears. No doubt his face was creaking just as much, Lawrence mused to himself self-reproachingly, as he stood before the door to the room.

He took a shallow breath and opened it without much hesitation, ready to greet its occupants.

What kept him frozen there in surprise was the simple fact that he did not really understand the scene that greeted him.

"...What are you doing?"

In response to Lawrence's question, Elsa and Holo merely glanced at him. Only Col's eyes had any feeling in them, and that feeling was a deep need for rescue.

"Don't look sideways," said Holo, pushing his head with her finger, such that it pointed straight forward. Holo stood directly behind him, busily combing his hair with the comb she normally reserved for her own tail. What made Lawrence wonder if they were about to try cutting his hair was the blanket that had been wrapped snugly around Col's neck.

At a short remove from the two, closer to the wall, was Elsa, attending to some sewing task. Given that Col's upper body was

now wrapped in a blanket, Elsa must have been mending his shirt. Her hand movements were quick and practiced, and when she occasionally shook the shirt out to make certain of her work, it was no longer in its former tattered state.

The optimistic way of viewing the situation was that Holo and Elsa could no longer stand to look at Col's pathetic state, and they were attempting to do something about it. But Lawrence detected a certain something else in the scene before him.

It was the same thing that had happened at the Beast and Fish Tail. He remembered himself, caught between Holo and the barmaid...

"Mm. Putting your fur in proper order makes you a different lad."

It was true that the constantly dusty Col looked markedly cleaner. Holo wore a very satisfied expression, her chest thrust out in pride.

But the next person to speak was not Col—it was Elsa.

"It will just be mussed again once he sleeps, so I don't see how there's much meaning in it." They were fitting words from someone who had received the truth of God and taught the path of righteousness to the public.

Elsa seemed to have finished her mending of the piece in her hands. While her face had its usual stoic expression, Lawrence detected a note of satisfaction in the sigh she let slip.

Elsa returned the mended clothing to Col, who tentatively took it and put it on.

"..."

Lawrence heard two silences.

One was that of Col, who stared at his shirt as though he could not believe what he was seeing, and the other was that of Holo, who was deeply unamused.



"No matter how fine the wine, if it's put in an old, tattered wineskin, it will break and spill. While looking fine isn't the most important thing, a container needs to be as sturdy as it possibly can be."

And just as Elsa said, now that he was wearing a well-mended shirt, Col had been transformed from an impoverished, suspicious errant student into a poor-but-trustworthy merchant's apprentice.

"Of course you can't simply leave your hair a mess, but that's easier to put in order than your clothing. And more important even than clothes are your bearing and presence. Your manner of speaking, your etiquette—these all must be good. Of course, compared with strong faith, even that is an unsteady thing. But on that count, I don't think we need worry."

Elsa spoke as though she were reciting scripture, but those last words to Col were softer and kinder and came with a gentle smile. Holo flinched away but said nothing more. Col had undoubtedly ended up in this predicament because Holo had earlier insisted that the "manners" Elsa was talking about were not so important.

For someone as inherently carefree as Holo, a bit of fur maintenance was more than enough, and anything more than that was simply affectation. Lawrence himself was a pragmatist and so generally came down more on Holo's side of things.

But when an untidy impression would harm business, he would gladly tidy himself up. The reason he had left Col alone was, quite honestly, that the boy was not his apprentice and therefore uninvolved in the representation of the business.

Since Elsa's faith drove her to help as many people as she could, and although she could be a busybody, she was fundamentally helpful. Unfortunately for Holo.

Lawrence had quite forgotten the melancholy he had felt earlier and smiled a long-suffering smile. He decided to speak to Holo, who had left herself no path of retreat.

But just then, Col turned and looked over his shoulder. "I've never had my hair combed before," he said with a bashful tone. "It felt really nice."

Holo's eyes went round in surprise, but she smiled, even more pleased than Col seemed. For Col to think of her feelings meant that her battle with Elsa was an indisputable loss.

"Mm, did it, then? Well, speak up whenever you've been drilled too hard and need a rest."

Elsa took the snipe exactly as it was intended, and the anger showed on her face. But from Lawrence's perspective, Holo's words were a final empty gesture in the face of defeat. Holo's chuckling made it clear that this was in fact so.

The wisewolf looked at Col's mended clothing. "Still," she added. "You'll make a good male, aye."

"So long as he follows my instruction, that prediction will indeed come true," said Elsa with uncharacteristic childishness, unable to let the opportunity for a counterattack slip by. But no one was as capable of childishness as Holo.

She stuck her tongue out at Elsa.

Elsa was more shocked than surprised by the display. Yet Col giggled—making clear, it seemed, that he was still very near to Holo in emotional maturity.

But Col was a practical and realistic thinker. As such, he knew that it was right for him to listen to Elsa above the other.

Once the thought came to Lawrence, he suddenly glimpsed the loneliness in Holo's smile. Hers was the face of the wisewolf he had come to know so well, and in her heart she was telling herself the same thing Lawrence was thinking, and it showed.

Even if she took Lawrence's advice to heart and tried to take a more carefree position, it seemed that even Holo could not behave selfishly to the bitter end.

It took talent to be a tyrant.

So what was so wrong with being a mere traveling merchant and giving his realistic view on things?

He wondered if she had somehow heard his excuse. Holo's ears pricked up, as though she had suddenly changed her mind on something, and she spun to regard him. "Now, then, let's hear what new foolishness this fool has brought to us, eh?"

As she spoke, her loneliness completely vanished, and Lawrence could only be impressed with her performance. Or perhaps she was simply relieved that there was someone there who understood her weaknesses. In truth, Lawrence felt quite the same way. From his aura, she seemed to have seen the direction the conversation was going to take.

The red-tinged amber eyes that fixed Lawrence so firmly in their gaze were more beautiful than usual.

"A fool's errand that could only be the result of God's mistake," said Lawrence, exaggerating a bit.

Holo turned to Elsa with similar exaggeration. "Well, then, ours must be a nasty God indeed."

Col's smile twitched a little, but Elsa was no ordinary girl. She let Holo's remarks pass by like a breeze and replied with a cool face and a quiet tone. "Those who believe so only reveal their own impoverished hearts."

Lawrence swore he could hear the sound of Holo's tail puffing out in irritation.

He smiled at the strong-willed pair. "So, might I perhaps discuss the situation with you?" he said, coming between them.

When Lawrence finished relaying Le Roi's story and his own opinions on it, a rather oppressive silence descended on the room.

At its center was, of course, Holo.

"Accompanying him is at least feasible. But doing so will bring me to the limit of my time. You would have to go on to Yoitsu on your own."

Holo, who was called the wisewolf, was at a loss for an answer.

If they aided Le Roi, it would remove one of the worst possibilities, and simply ascertaining the truth of the story would give her some measure of relief. But in exchange, it would become difficult for Lawrence to spare the time to travel north.

On the other hand, if they ignored the story and proceeded according to their original plan, there would be lingering worries, and it was all too clear what would happen if those worries became tragedy. On top of that, there would be the regret that would come with having had this opportunity to act and letting it pass.

No one knew the pain of being unable to turn back time better than Holo did. She did not look at Lawrence and simply stared at the floor, brow furrowed.

The question was simply whether or not they would go to Yoitsu together—but Lawrence had put so much into being able to fulfill his promise to Holo...

No doubt the reason she was not looking at Lawrence was that she feared that if she did, the answer would come out. The wisewolf prided herself on not being carried away by emotions, and so she could not possibly look at Lawrence.

And Lawrence said nothing, as he knew that this decision had to be Holo's.

In any case, he could see her answer. Or believed he did.

Which is why, when Holo sighed and looked up at him, he was momentarily confused.

"We have no choice but to take the fruitful path," she said with a tired smile, sounding almost relieved.

It was her wisewolf's face. He had seen it so many times before.

After the surprise, Lawrence felt a small surge of anger. "You mean—" he began, but the question he was about to ask was cut off by a sharp look from her.

Holo's expression immediately softened, though, as though to say she very much wished they could go to Yoitsu together.

"Your promise to me was that you would take me to Yoitsu. So long as you provide me true directions there, I consider that fulfillment of the promise. Whether or not you come with me is a matter of sentiment only."

By contrast, the matter of Le Roi had practical implications.

Any proper adult, not just a wisewolf, knew better than to have their reason swayed by temporary emotions. It was right and proper, and moreover, the attitude Lawrence took in his daily business.

And yet the shock Lawrence received from Holo's words was very much a matter of sentiment.

"But there was another, wasn't there?"

"Another?" Lawrence replied.

Holo glanced at Col and Elsa briefly. "You know that," she said, faintly amused. "I have a debt to you. Do you remember? You were terrible about it. You said you'd follow me to the ends of the earth to get it from me, you did. Such an avaricious merchant you are."

Elsa and Col could not help but weigh the truth of Holo's words, but they were clearly shocked to see Lawrence's frustrated face.

He had long since forgotten that.

"Did you truly...!" said Elsa, anger and scorn on her face after she got over her surprise. Using debt to force another into bondage was a sin she would not forgive, no matter the circumstances. Especially not when it was someone close; her eyes made it clear she thought of Lawrence as a heartless miser.

"No, there were circumstances...!"

"Mm. Still, if the profit from this pays off that debt, then surely even the stubbornest man or god would forgive it, eh?" said Holo, earning her a disapproving look from Elsa.

But at the toothy, carefree smile Holo put on, Elsa appeared to have nothing more to say. She sighed in exasperation and muttered a prayer: "Oh, God, please forgive me my powerlessness."

"So, then—at least ten days by wagon, you said? Well, with enough good food and wine, I think I can enjoy myself for that long," said Holo airily, as she looked toward the window.

Lawrence could not help but swallow his words when he saw how she looked.

Did she really mean to say that at Yoitsu she would be able to part ways with him smiling, so long as she had food and wine? Lawrence wanted to ask but knew nothing would come of the answer.

The question of whether or not she would go to Yoitsu with Lawrence was a purely sentimental one. And Holo could always part ways with a smile—because she was well used to forcing those smiles.

"Come, now that it's decided, you can accept this fellow's proposition. If you miss your chance, 'twill be a sad state of affairs indeed. You're always saying you're a merchant—go make some easy profit, eh?"

Lawrence knew perfectly well she was forcing this cheer. But Holo seemed satisfied to see that he knew. Her sad smile said it all too clearly: "You needn't worry about me so."

It was simply not in Holo's nature to act selfishly. Even when Lawrence pushed her to, even when he tried to incite her, she pulled away from the struggle over Col.

It was all he could do to nod. "You're right. Might as well go out with a flourish, eh?"

It was a rather good line for an insensitive merchant, Lawrence felt. But Holo turned instantly irritated. "Must you always be so gloomy?"

"Huh?" Col smiled an apologetically nervous smile.

And a smile, too, was the only reply Lawrence could give the sighing Holo.

Lawrence put on his coat and looked down through the window onto the street below. It was still crowded with people, but at the church, evening prayers would soon begin.

As morning came early to the church, so did evening. Which meant that in the winter, when the sun set so early, "evening" was pushed back a bit. The marketplace would close with the bells that signaled the end of evening prayers, so the town merchants would still be running busily here and there.

Which meant there was no guarantee that Le Roi was waiting somewhere for Lawrence's reply, and just as Holo said, if someone else took the opportunity out from under him, it would be rather pathetic.

Having decided to accept the offer, there was no time to waste.

"Huh? You're not coming?" His preparations complete, Lawrence looked over his shoulder to see Holo still on the bed.

"I'm a wisewolf. What need have I to run around for such trivial affairs?"

As she sat there tending to her tail, it was true that she did not look much like someone concerned with staying busy.

Lawrence lacked the energy to say anything to that, so he looked instead to Col. But before his gaze had even landed on the boy, Holo spoke up. "You'll stay and mind the room with me, won't you, lad?"

Elsa had left the inn to attend evening prayers, so if Col were to leave, Holo would have been alone.

She hated being alone, of course, but more important than that was surely the chance to monopolize Col. She was no match for a head-on confrontation with Elsa, so, having realized that, the sneaky wisewolf was taking advantage of her opponent's absence.

"Good point. Don't open the door for strangers, don't order any food, and if you go anywhere, be sure to tell the innkeeper. I can leave you to mind Holo, can't I?" said Lawrence. He had to get his attack in while he could.

Col smiled but was mindful of Holo, who in turn seemed completely unruffled. It wasn't very charming of her, but this was not the first time she had failed to charm.

Lawrence left the room and descended the stairs.

He looked left and right along the crowded street and, after a moment's thought, began walking in the direction of Philon's shop. There was a good possibility Le Roi had headed off somewhere, but going through Philon's shop would be the quickest way to contact him.

Even as it was starting to seem impossible that Lawrence would be able to go to Yoitsu, he still had to prepare for the possibility that he would be heading north.

Lawrence mused on how he hoped he would be able to learn more once he committed to the plan. He thought about this as he looked up at the church steeple, which was visible from everywhere in town. It was the heart of the place, and right about now it would be filled with the faithful—people like Elsa.

To tell which among the townspeople were devout and which were not, one needed only to look at who was doing business in the marketplace until it closed. The devout would not remain, instead hurrying to the church well before the end of business in the marketplace.

Occasionally, there were some who were faithful not to God

but rather to the scent of wine, but what they had in common was a wish to live in peace. The only difference was whether they found salvation in prayer or drink.

When Lawrence arrived at Philon's place, he came upon Philon and Le Roi chatting, each with a drink in their hand.

Le Roi's reaction was quick. He was an experienced merchant, and immediately understood Lawrence's facial expression.

"I accept your proposal."

Since he normally adopted such a comically exaggerated manner, his quiet reaction in this moment carried all the more weight. He was a cunning merchant, indeed.

Le Roi took Lawrence's hand as though he were too moved for words. "I thought that I had lost God's favor a second time. I was about to give up."

Still, not all of his pleasure was an act. Most of the merchants that crawled the earth had a shortage not of nerve nor knowledge nor luck—no, it was coin they lacked.

"Quite a surprise. My instincts led me wrong." It was Philon who spoke these words, watching the two men shake hands. As he opened a great ledger and made note of something in it, he seemed almost like a notary. And given that he dealt with mercenaries, who held their trust even more closely than merchants, he was probably more reliable than any notary.

"To think, a man with a woman and child with him would ignore such danger."

"I imagine this will be the last time," said Lawrence.

Philon grinned sardonically at this and cocked his head slightly. "I've heard the same thing from the fighters that come through my shop."

Lawrence smiled, a smile tinged with the childish hope that what he said was actually true.

"Still, I'm truly thankful. I tried to get Mr. Philon here to listen

to me, but he'd have none of it." Le Roi waved his hands, returning to his former exaggerated manner.

Philon was writing something in an elegant hand, and he made a displeased face that had no trace of a smile in it. "Don't be stupid. I already trade with mercenaries. If someone saw me making a deal with the slavers at the Delink Company, what then? You wouldn't have to be very devout to wonder what sort of evil business I was up to."

Anyone who lived in a town and did business in one place had their actions watched by others. And unlike a traveling merchant, who could weather a failure and move to another town, any stain on their reputation would simply remain. That was why apothecaries did not visit taverns and why scale makers did not make friends with money changers. The former would be suspected of drugging the drinks, and the latter of tampering with the scales.

"We've nothing to fear on that count." Le Roi put his thick arm around Lawrence's shoulder.

And, in fact, that was surely one of the reasons why Le Roi had chosen Lawrence to approach. If either of them failed, in the worst case, they could simply turn tail and run. Also, the company they were seeking a loan from was openly involved in the slave trade and obviously did not care about its public reputation.

Philon sighed a resigned sigh, but there was a faint smile on his face—and perhaps a slight envy of the sort of freedom Lawrence and Le Roi enjoyed.

It was said that travelers endured uncertainty, but the town bound were stifled. Nothing ever went quite as one would wish, which was what kept people striving forward.

"Still, I'm truly grateful. I'm lucky you decided the way you did."

"All I can be responsible for is mediating with the Delink Company. I have no idea whether they'll agree."

Le Roi nodded immediately. But the book dealer was neither ignorant nor naive. His response was quick. "They won't agree—they'll be *made* to agree." Le Roi thrust his chest out, looking like some great pigeon. "I'm very confident in the collateral, after all."

A little overwhelmed, Lawrence nodded. Le Roi exhaled the great breath he had drawn, then quieted his voice. "By the way, just between you and me, we may end up getting ahead of Mr. Philon."

Philon's eyes alone fixed upon Le Roi. A smile played about his lips.

"I had no idea. How novel."

If Holo had seen the transparent exchange, she would have laughed. Col would have been confused. And Elsa would have made a displeased face.

Le Roi nodded and turned to face Lawrence. "Do you mind talking here?"

Lawrence had no reason to refuse. He nodded slowly.

As Philon attended to his own work, Lawrence and Le Roi began to make their plans.

"Near the capital of Ploania, Endima, there's a town called Kieschen. The book is with a trading company there."

Lawrence did not know the exact location of the town, but he had heard the name before. But Endima was easily a twenty-day journey by horse-drawn wagon; if Lawrence introduced Le Roi to the Delink Company, it was all but certain he would have to stay with the bookseller to watch him, since once the introduction was made, any suspicious movements would be on Lawrence's head.

Which meant seeing this through would take a month or two months.

Even if everything went perfectly, Lawrence would have to head directly south afterward.

"My job as a bookseller is to use my contacts to know the trends among book collectors. Using those contacts, I've worked out the location of every single book written in the desert country language."

"I'm surprised you've never been accused of heresy," said Lawrence, half-surprised and half-restraining himself. For a moment, he glimpsed Le Roi's true nature as the man smiled a dark smile.

"To catch a snake, use a serpent. The inspector telling you the wine's been adulterated is the one drinking it down. That's what I'm getting at."

"I see." Lawrence gestured for Le Roi to continue with an apologetic gesture.

"My intuition, at least based on what I was able to learn this past summer, is that it's unlikely that the trading company has realized the true value of the book. The master of the company is a great lover of adventure tales, especially thick histories. A traveling entertainer I know told me as much in the postscript of a letter and said he acquired the book as part of a big lot of those adventure stories. If he hasn't realized what it's worth, it's probably sitting in a long line of books waiting to be translated."

This was not a simple assumption. It was a very likely possibility. Le Roi was not the careless, foolish man he appeared to be. He possessed an orderly and logical mind, like fine lines of writing in a thick tome. "In order to buy the book, we have to solve two problems. One is how to buy it. The other is how to get the money there."

"As for the first, we'll surely have to go to the town ourselves. It's not as though we have a branch company or a trusted underling we can send on our behalf."

Le Roi smiled a familiar smile at Lawrence's words. The owners of large companies would not have to actually travel in order to

make such a purchase. "As someone who makes the greater part of his living on his own feet, I quite agree."

"As for the second problem, a money order seems appropriate."

A money order—a merchant's technique likely to make a hard-headed churchman knit his brows and cry witchcraft. It was a miraculous thing that lent money was moved from places far removed from one another without having to actually risk transporting it.

For example, suppose that Hugues's company in Kerube had an agreement with Philon's shop. In that case, Lawrence would bring coin to Hugues's company in Kerube and receive a money order in return. He would then go upriver to Lenos and give the money order to Philon. Whereupon, Philon would pay the amount written on the certificate to Lawrence. In this way, Lawrence could move money from Kerube to Lenos without having to carry the heavy coin.

This was a money order.

"I quite agree. And then we needn't worry about one another running off with the money on the way," said Le Roi, a bit of self-mockery in his tone. It was true, though, that such security was another nice feature of money orders.

Money orders could only be written between companies with standing agreements and had no value in the hands of illiterate bandits. If either Le Roi or Lawrence wanted to betray the other and cash the order, a proviso could be added that would prevent such a situation.

"The problem is whether such a large money order can actually be cashed. We'll be in a bind if we travel all the way out there, only to find we can't turn it back into coin."

That was indeed the problem. Money orders were a convenient tool, but they were imperfect.

If the company in Kieschen to whom the order was written refused to exchange the money order certificate for coin, Lawrence and Le Roi would have traveled all that way with nothing but a scrap of paper to show for it. What if Kieschen were experiencing a similar money supply problem to what Lenos was now facing? Even if the company wanted to honor the money order, they might well be unable to.

Despite the existence of money orders, there were some stubborn merchants who insisted on cash, despite the dangers, because they had witnessed precisely such unlucky situations.

And the larger the amount of money, the harder to ignore such risks became.

"On that count, we can hope to get confirmation from the Delink Company. But in order to spread the risk around, it seems like having the order split up among several companies would be good. If Kieschen is close to Endima, we could also include some companies in the capital. The Delink Company ought to have relationships with many of them, after all."

"You're quite right. It seems we're in agreement on the broad strokes of this plan, Mr. Lawrence." Le Roi seemed to confirm his understanding, but it was important to make that confirmation itself clear, lest something unfortunate happen later. It was all too easy to see confusion arising when those who trusted only coin and those who trusted only certificates shook hands in agreement.

And it was not a matter of logic that was to be trusted. More important was experience, which often transcended pure reason.

"I once thought in all seriousness that I would never again involve myself with the Delink Company." Lawrence still felt that they lived in different worlds.

When Lawrence thought of the Delink Company or of Eve, it summoned within him a strange combination of envy and

despair. If Holo had been with him, she would have laughed her amusement and called him a fool.

"I've thought similar things upon many a hungover morning."

Le Roi was quite right.

Lawrence directed his gaze to one of the shop's few wooden windows. The light that entered through it gave evidence that the sun would soon be setting. "I prefer to get the most unpleasant business sorted out first, personally."

The Delink Company's business was not constrained by the church's bells, and more than anything else, Lawrence did not wish to go to bed that night dreading a visit to the Delink Company the next day.

But Le Roi's answer was quick. "Is that so? I myself always eat my favorite food first."

Lawrence looked across the table at Le Roi, whose round face wore that irritating smile of his. It seemed merchants like Le Roi were happiest when dealing with the most difficult opponents.

"Oh, by the way," Lawrence said as something occurred to him. "If I hadn't agreed to talk to the Delink Company, what would you have done?"

Given that their agreement had been struck, there did not seem to be any harm in asking. But Le Roi made an uncomfortable face and pulled his chin in.

It was possible that he would have been in a bind, unable to do anything at all, but in the end it was Philon, watching the conversation from outside, who answered.

"If he told you, he'd never get to talk to you again, you see," said Philon jokingly and with such a devastating accuracy that Holo herself may as well have said it.

Despite being similarly simple, this shop was clearly very different from Philon's. It was decorated in small ways, and the

stonework was so precise that one could not fit a hair between the seams.

In a depressingly long row of magnificent trading houses, this one was in no way insufficient.

It was terribly silent inside the Delink Company, and the feeling was so overwhelming that even the clamor from outside seemed to shrink away from the aura.

"What a happy development, that you'd finally take me up on my offer of wine," said Luz Eringin with a low smile.

The Delink Company was somewhat unusual in that it had four masters of equal rank. But the other three seemed to be out on other business, so in this large room, with its four great chairs, Eringin was the only one sitting.

"And I see you've brought a friend."

Of all the people Lawrence knew, Eringin was probably in the top three in terms of people he would never wish to introduce a friend to. Eringin himself was certainly aware that this was how he was viewed by others and, if anything, seemed to enjoy it.

He chuckled at his own words. "Do have a seat," he said, gesturing that Lawrence and Le Roi should sit.

The chairs were magnificent; if Lawrence were the master of his own company, he would never let customers sit in their like. The one Le Roi sat in did not so much as creak under his considerable weight.

"I notice that you're alone today."

When dealing with someone who had an overwhelming advantage, it was usually best to be as direct as possible. When the difference in power was so clear, the more conversation there was, the more such disadvantage could be exploited. This was why wise men stayed silent—with every word spoken, it became that much more difficult to remain a wise man.

But Lawrence's nerves had gotten the better of him, and before he knew it, he had opened with small talk.

"Indeed. We don't normally gather except to make a 'purchase.' As a rule, we only allow people we know into this room."

"I'm honored, then."

At Lawrence's words, Eringin shifted upon the table, the overlapping thumbs of his clasped hands exchanging positions. "There's no need to feel honored. I've heard about what happened in Kerube," he said, speaking without betraying any attempt to intimidate.

It was as though he were saying, *We know all about you*, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world.

Eringin smiled and continued.

"All it takes for men like us to live on is to adhere to a few simple principles. One of those is to know everything we can about the individuals with whom we share a connection. When it comes time to expand our business, we simply follow that connection."

If Holo had been there, Lawrence was certain she would have stepped on his foot or kicked his leg. They had started with small talk but had somehow arrived at the real business at hand.

Eringin's words were meant to imply that because Lawrence was a man known to him, he was willing to listen.

"Heh. Seems you decided not to show your fangs today, though," said Eringin. He looked at Lawrence, who had realized just how he was being led around, and smiled an amused smile. "Have more confidence, Mr. Lawrence. You surprised us once before, and you survived that woman's plans. Moreover, I hear that once you arrived downriver, you rather brilliantly got your revenge. It would be incorrect of you to either underestimate yourself or overestimate us. The only difference between us is the choice of weapons."

Compliments were cheap. Bowing in response to a compliment given was also cheap. No doubt Le Roi would readily agree to this common merchant's rule.

And yet, the man before him had been called "sir" by a town official and was clearly someone whose favor was dearly sought. He undoubtedly took pride in the weight of his words and actions.

"My thanks to you for saying so," said Lawrence, giving not a merchant's smile but an honest one.

Eringin's eyes narrowed. "Now, then. Tell me your business."

They had cut through the fog and crossed the thin ice; the first danger was passed.

The bookseller straightened and took a deep breath.

"A forbidden book of knowledge?" Eringin repeated briefly, his eyes fixed closely on Le Roi.

The man who wielded joviality as a weapon allowed himself to now, for once, become serious. "I believe it is a copy of a book that was banned thirty-four years ago at the second Remenon Ecumenical Council. The original was burned. The author was confined, and that's where the official record ends. Among booksellers like me, there's a rumor that an apprentice of his escaped with a rough draft of the book and made a copy. But there's been no way to verify that, and I've heard of countless swindlers using the story to their own ends."

The existence of secret copies or annotations of books was a common tactic among swindlers. Col had been snared by one and had ended up having to flee the academic center of Aquent.

"But this time is different?"

"Yes. As I've just explained." Le Roi had smoothly and efficiently relayed the story, from the discovery at the abbey to the letter from the friend in the acting troupe.

The explanation was, in a way, too smooth, but whether Le Roi was telling the truth or not, his passion was obvious.

"Mr. Lawrence, you've no notion of how much of this story is true. Correct?"

"Yes."

"Given the particulars, it ought to be regarded with suspicion. For you to make this introduction...you understand what that means, do you not?"

Lawrence nodded in response to Eringin's slightly wry way of speaking. "I've heard from sources I trust of this man's tenacity."

Of course, this was of Le Roi's tenacity when it came to his quick wits and cheap shots, but generously interpreted they spoke of his strength when pursuing his goals, as well.

Eringin cocked his head and smiled a smile that did not reach his eyes.

Le Roi's face was severe, and he wiped sweat from it nervously.

"This isn't about money, is it?" Eringin closed his eyes and nodded his head forward slightly, as though searching his memory. No doubt he was thinking of what had happened the day of the rioting in Lenos. Lawrence had kicked aside the vast profit Eve promised him and returned to this very shop—to retrieve Holo.

"I am deeply attached to the northlands," said Le Roi evasively.

Eringin bared his teeth. It was a smile of impatience. "For someone who does business like mine, that's a terrible thing to hear."

Philon had refused to deal with the Delink precisely because they were slave traders.

Mercenaries made their living in two main ways: plunder and slave selling. Salary did not enter into their calculations. It was not guaranteed, and even if they did receive one, it would be tiny at first. But the reason they continued to fight for their masters was for the promise of plunder.

Though it was a very roundabout way, Lawrence had introduced Le Roi to this company because he thought it would help the northlands. But the Delink Company stood to earn a great deal from the unrest that the schemes of the Debau Company would wreak upon those lands.

Lawrence could not even begin to imagine how many people would be captured and sold into slavery or see their village burned to the ground.

"But let us leave such agonizing to the philosophers and righteousness to the clergy. Our role is to fill the needs of others. So my question to you is: Whose need are you fulfilling, Mr. Le Roi?"

The negotiation had taken a step forward.

Le Roi cleared his throat and answered. "There is a man, Lord Nicholas of the Raondille duchy. If a book is not forbidden, he... he has no lust for it."

Eringin chuckled silently at the choice of words and thumped his chest with his closed fist, as though trying to cough. Given that he was a slaver, perhaps he was remembering a difficult-to-fill request from a customer. "Ahem. Apologies. You were saying, this Sir Nicholas."

"Yes."

"Here in our customer list—it's all up here, of course—there's no such person." Eringin tapped meaningfully at his temple. "Setting aside whether or not such an individual actually exists..."

Le Roi was summoning the energy to explain further, but Eringin stopped him with a hand. He did not seem especially interested in the question of the individual's existence.

So what was it that he was asking? They could emphasize the veracity of their information as much as they wanted, but if he was not going to hear the explanations, then what was his intention?

Lawrence's heart was filled with genuine curiosity.

Eringin asked an insightful question. "How much profit do you expect to make?"

Merchants were fundamentally motivated by their own profit. Which meant this was exactly the question to ask.

In making up a plan, one's footing had to be solid. And there was no merchant who failed to consider profit. What was interesting was that even the most coolheaded merchant found it hard to stay calm when it came time to estimate the amount of profit to be had. And so, that profit was sometimes extremely overestimated or deeply underestimated.

Lawrence had been taught the larger the deal, the greater the gap between the prediction and the realized profit could be—because no matter how much they might struggle against it, there was a limit to how coolheaded a person could stay, his master had said.

If Le Roi had some other nefarious plan in his mind, he would surely claim a suspicious amount.

Someone trying to make a plan to turn a profit would overestimate their profit, and someone who was making a plan to lie would overestimate their plan.

But the liar would believe their own lie and would not overestimate their profit.

"In *lumione* gold," said Le Roi matter-of-factly, "I expect to sell it for one hundred and twenty pieces."

"I've heard the mantle of the Queen of Alain was about that much."

Eringin was asking what the basis for this figure was.

"This marketplace is filled with pride and supposition, but from what I've learned, the alchemist Aran Mihail's *The Heart of Gods and Iron* sold for a hundred *lumione*. I do not think this will fetch less than that."

It was an unbelievable sum for a mere book.

But considering it objectively, it seemed terribly likely that the collection of absurd items would lead some individuals to aim for the collection of absurd profits.

Eringin gave Le Roi an unblinking gaze. When his eyes finally closed, Le Roi exhaled his held breath.

"And the value of the book you've brought as collateral?"

"If you show it to a first-rate bookseller, you'll easily get thirty gold pieces."

Le Roi had set the book down on the table at the beginning of the conversation. It was large, but the binding was very plain, and seemed that even if it were decorating some large bookshelf, it would probably be filling some gap on the bottom shelf.

It did not seem to Lawrence like it could be so valuable, but such an amount of money would put his dream of opening a shop in a town much closer. He knew perfectly well that there was always a bigger fish, but sometimes there were too many big fish.

Eringin did not so much as nod but rang a small bell that was on the table. At the sound, a door to the room opened silently and a single boy entered, who drew close to his master's ear. At length, Eringin nodded, and the boy gave a deep bow, then left the room.

"I can lend you eighty *lumione*. That will be enough, I trust?"

Le Roi drew a shallow breath and almost whimpered. "That will be enough."

"However, regardless of whether your purchase goes well or not, we're charging a commission of twenty *lumione*."

It was marginally less than the worth of the collateral. It meant that even if they failed in their purchase, they would be left enough to use as travel money to return south.

"And there's a condition."

"Wha—!" Le Roi was not surprised so much as he was overly willing to accommodate.

Eringin waited for Le Roi to calm himself, then continued.

"Our business is not unlike a sort of gambling. Luck can be very instrumental. If at all possible, we would like to ride the winning horse while sitting in these very chairs." His eyes were on Lawrence. "The condition is that you go with this man to make the purchase. You will watch, and listen, and if there are no problems, we will lend the money. That is the condition."

It was an expected condition.

Eringin spoke as though he was offering a prayer to God asking for good fortune, but in actuality there was nothing but realistic practicality in his words. By basing the loan on what Lawrence saw and heard, it placed the burden of responsibility firmly on Lawrence.

If Le Roi were planning something dishonest, or failed terribly and lost the loaned amount, the blame would fall to Lawrence.

But the moment he heard those words, it was a different emotion that arose within him.

"Any complaints?" Eringin asked, looking at Lawrence a bit curiously.

"Not at all," Lawrence hastily replied. He had realized that he was deeply discouraged.

Unbelievably, he had subconsciously been holding onto the ridiculous hope that they would be rejected here, which would have let him travel north, albeit with some regrets. He was nervous, and he could tell his knees were trembling at the pressure.

He nearly laughed out loud at his own foolishness.

"Still, it'll be a tiresome journey all the way out there and back, so I'll send someone with you," said Eringin as he rang the bell again. A different boy soon entered the room. "We'll issue a money order to several companies we deal with there, with a proviso that all three of you must be there to collect the coin."

It was a perfectly reasonable condition, one that ensured nobody could betray anyone else.

Eringin gave the boy instructions in a quiet voice, and the boy quickly withdrew.

"Ah, that's right. It may be pointless to say so, but the man I'm sending with you has my utmost trust. And the companies in Kieschen where you'll redeem the money order all have large debts to us."

Threatening the attendant was pointless. And trying to escape with the purchased book would also be pointless, since the companies in Kieschen would be watching. That Eringin could say all this with such a smile was the greatest threat of all.

"Still," continued Eringin. With the negotiation concluded, the atmosphere had relaxed somewhat and Le Roi wiped his face again—he was sweating so much it seemed like he would melt. It was very like the master of the Delink Company to make one final surprise attack. "When you refer to the company in Kieschen, do you mean *them*?"

In negotiations like these, it was customary not to reveal one's purchasing destination until the very end.

Le Roi froze in his chair disbelievingly.

Eringin's smile was more terrifying than any mercenary's. "The master there has a great fondness for the desert nations." It would not be strange for the sort of collector who was fond of such books to also be a slaver's customer. All the more so if he had eccentric tastes. "I've introduced him to many lovely dark-skinned ladies. So...he's the one, eh?"

The only reason Lawrence was able to remain calm was because, in a certain sense, this deal had nothing to do with him. Otherwise, he would have been sweating waterfalls just like Le Roi was next to him.

"Oh, worry not." Eringin's voice was quiet. "It's our custom to leave unfamiliar business in the hands of those better suited to it."

One could say whatever one wanted. But nothing could begin without trust.

Slavers traded in people who were brought to them filled with pain and fear, or at the very least anger and hatred.

One could not help but commend such a magnificent ability.

With negotiations completed, Eringin shook the hand of each man and invited them both to dinner.

Le Roi looked as though, were he to endure his anxiety any longer, he would die, and Lawrence had his own doubts about being able to eat with them and keep his food down.

So they made their apologies, and Eringin looked as deeply disappointed as ever. It was hard to know how much of that was an act, but it was possible that he truly was disappointed.

Eringin and a servant boy saw them out, and Lawrence and Le Roi left the shop. It was long since dark outside.

But the night was young, and the port was lit by lamplight—lamps hanging from the bows of ships and lamps hung aloft by those working to sort through the cargo. And, of course, lamps hung in all the establishments selling wine around the port, where the carousing to wash away the day's frustration was beginning.

"...Surely no marquis or count could be so terrible," were the first words out of Le Roi's mouth.

"Well, the town officials call him 'sir.'"

"If a man like him had a formal title, he'd rule the country. What a horrifying thought."

Le Roi was sweating as though he really was horrified. Seeing this, Lawrence wondered if he himself had above-average courage, but doubted it was so. According to Holo, it was simple thickheadedness.

"But we've made the deal."

On that count, at least, there was no mistake. Lawrence took the hand Le Roi offered and shook it firmly. The opportunity they had just negotiated was of a life-changing scale.

"I may not be worth much, but I'll do what I can," offered Lawrence.

"Ha-ha-ha! What are you saying? If you hadn't been there with me, I would've suffocated! I'll be borrowing your knowledge, too. I'm paying you three hundred silver pieces, after all!"

Lawrence got the feeling that Le Roi was reminding him he had been paid a sum just to make an introduction, but Lawrence naturally did not find this cause for anger. It was the sort of thing any merchant could expect to do, after all.

"Now then, let's go somewhere to celebrate! My throat is dry from nerves."

It was an attractive proposition, but Lawrence was thinking about Holo and the others. "I'm sorry, but...," he began.

But this was Le Roi, he of easy charm and affability. The man soon understood and pulled back. "Ah, of course. Well, it's not like we won't be sleeping and eating together quite a lot soon enough. Perhaps we'll avoid quarreling if we don't see each other's face too much until then," he said with a guffaw.

Lawrence could only smile a wry smile.

But when they parted with a handshake, it was firmer than their first had been. "Well then, I bid you good night!" boomed Le Roi and walked off.

Lawrence replied with a wave and headed for his own destination. He only got a few steps, though, before he stopped short in surprise.

"You—" Lawrence murmured, for before him had staggeringly appeared a deeply displeased Holo, her face distorted with emotion. The word *staggering* was no figure of speech, either—Holo

had indeed staggered before him, her arms clasped around herself as she shivered.

"Don't tell me...were you there the whole time?"

"..." Holo did not answer. She tried to nod but was too cold to manage it properly.

Lawrence realized that her expression of displeasure was simply a result of how cold she was. "Ah well, anyway, let's get into a shop somewhere—and anyway, what were you doing out in this cold?"

He took off his coat and wrapped it around Holo's shoulders. Her robe was as cold as though water had been poured on it, and Holo was shivering slightly. "I-I thought you might be deceived, and I..."

"You were worried about me? That doesn't mean you should stand outside..."

Lawrence could not help but find her ability to insult him in such a moment rather impressive. But he set aside the question of whether to laugh or roll his eyes and instead put his hand on her slim shoulders, which were now covered by his coat.

Fortunately Eringin's building was filled with fireplaces that were well stocked with wood, so the coat was already nice and warm. Lawrence peered at her and saw that Holo's profile was beginning to thaw into something less alarming.

"Ah, there's a stall there. Wait just a bit."

Holo nodded obediently at Lawrence's words and huddled next to the trading company's window, through the wooden shutter of which a bit of lamplight leaked.

Lawrence looked back at her once. She was bitterly downcast. "I swear," he murmured and quickly ordered some strong wine from the stall. "Here, drink."

The stall sold wine that was well suited to the cold season in a

cold land. Holo took the cup from Lawrence, put it to her lips, and squeezed her eyes closed.

"Your tail," said Lawrence with a smile, but Holo made no move to hide her puffed-out tail. She exhaled sharply and took another breath, then another sip. The wine was helping with the cold anyway.

"Not too much!" said Lawrence, trying to grab the cup away as Holo immediately went for a third drink. But his hand stopped before it ever reached the cup.

Lawrence's gaze went from Holo's chest up to her face.

"Is that...," he started, and Holo took her third drink as though she was trying to escape.

She exhaled a second puff of breath, and she finally smiled a Holo-like smile as the color returned to her face. "I'm a fool, aren't I?" she asked, referring to her drinking more wine after already being drunk.

If he had demanded an explanation, he surely would have gotten one. Holo held the cup in both hands but with her arms pressed tightly to her sides. Even if that was partially due to the cold, there was another truer reason.

She was holding something there, the outline of it just visible in what lamplight came through the window shutter.

"They arrived a bit after you went out. But...," began Holo, handing Lawrence her cup and producing the items from under her arm. There were two sealed letters, one of which was significantly larger than the other. As though a map might have been drawn on it.

"This is what you searched for on my behalf. It didn't seem right for just me and Col to look at them. To say nothing of that blockhead." Her tone was sharp, but her face smiled drunkenly. She was probably embarrassed that she could not hide her happiness.

Holo had stood outside, shivering like a fool, just to freeze that foolish grin into her face.

"I thought," said Holo, looking up, "that it would be fitting to look at it with you."

It was partially the wine's effect, but Holo's face in the firelight looked like roasted honey candy. Lawrence reached out to her with his empty hand. He caressed her left cheek with his thumb, as though putting her face's soft curve back into place.

Even if she had made the logical decision regarding how to make for Yoitsu, evidently that did not mean all her subsequent decisions would be made using logic. Which was what had led to her amusingly foolish notion to venture out and wait for him in this freezing midwinter weather.

"You are quite the fool, yes."

Holo flashed her fangs, and her breath puffed whitely past them. Lawrence gave her a full, but light, embrace, then pulled back.

"You haven't opened them yet?"

"I did hold them up to the sun many times, trying to see through."

She did not want to open them but desperately wanted to see the contents. Lawrence imagined her trying to resolve this terrible conflict by holding the letters up to the sun—a tactic more suited to a foolish puppy than a clever wisewolf.

Lawrence patted her head. "Who should open them?"

"Me."

Of course, Lawrence thought to himself, but then Holo pushed the two letters in her hand at him. "...is what I would want to say, but there are two letters here. If I look at one of them, I fear I may collapse into weeping again."

Lawrence thought back to when Holo had fooled him into thinking she could not read. He had carelessly left a record of the destruction of Yoitsu where she could find it, and trouble had resulted.

Lawrence accepted the letters almost apologetically and with a pained smile. If Holo had wanted to read them he would have let her, but otherwise he did not want her exposed to them.

Her hand brushed against his and was quite cold. Somehow, he was brought to notice the contrast between her hands and Le Roi's—how small and delicate and feminine hers were.

"But the negotiations went well, did they?"

Lawrence returned the cup to Holo and was about to unseal the letters when Holo suddenly brought the other subject up.

"Weren't you listening?" Holo's ears could have heard the conversation inside the shop, Lawrence assumed.

But Holo shook her head. "I could not hear," she said, then sighed and gave him an upturned gaze. "But I know the outcome."

It was as though she were posing a riddle.

If she knew the result already, why would she go to the trouble of asking him how things had gone? Lawrence's hand stopped before unsealing the letters and looked down into Holo's eyes, which shone golden in the flickering light.

There was a moment of silence.

Holo cracked first, but certainly not out of forgiveness for Lawrence's obtuseness.

"That meat bun of a man's face was so pleased, so the negotiations must have been a success. But your face was not so happy. What might have caused that, I wonder?"

"Ugh," Lawrence groaned, which was as good as any confession.

Holo folded her arms and sighed. Her wine-soaked breath only emphasized her anger. "You hoped that the negotiations would fail and that you'd be able to go to Yoitsu with me."

She had seen right through him.

He said nothing and only averted his face.

"And if you'd lost your chance for profit and brought disaster to Yoitsu, when then? No, that is not even the problem. What

bothers me can be expressed quite completely thus: You're even more of a maiden than I!"

"...Can't you at least call me 'sentimental'?"

"Hmph!" Holo snorted, and Lawrence watched her drink her wine, bitter thoughts filling his mind. "There are good sentiments and bad sentiments, you know."

It was in these times most of all that Holo's wisewolf side came out. Lawrence sighed and unsealed the letters. The first one he opened was the larger, the one likely to have a map drawn upon it.

Holo sipped her wine in an attempt to disguise her keen interest, but her eyes were carefully watching Lawrence's hands.

Lawrence pulled a thick sheet of parchment out of the envelope. He traded it to Holo for her cup. He sipped it as he watched Holo's nervous face. It was a strong, dry wine.

"Come, now," said Holo before opening the parchment.

"Hm?"

Her eyes were on the about-to-be-opened map. Or else she thought something incredible was hiding between its folded pages.

"What's wrong?" Lawrence asked again.

Holo's eyes reflected the yellow lamplight as they turned to Lawrence. "Even if you cannot go with me...can we not at least read this together?"

Lawrence chuckled through his nose in spite of himself. He nodded and moved from facing Holo to standing alongside her. This blocked the light that spilled from the window, so Lawrence gently nudged Holo over.

All the while, Holo held the map in her hands, her posture unchanging.

"All right," said Lawrence.

After looking up at him uncertainly, Holo held her breath and opened the map.

"Oh ho." The admiring voice was Lawrence's.

Even in the uncertainly flickering lamplight, the map was obviously a magnificent thing.

As was customary on maps, the four corners had been decorated with drawings of gods or spirits, and in the far south sea was a drawing of a water basin said to never run dry, along with a vast octopus trying to drink it all.

The towns and villages were connected by lines indicating major roads. Some of the remote villages' names were unknown to Lawrence, while some others would have been unknown to anyone who was not a traveling merchant. Among the mountains, too, spirits were drawn here and there, which made the locations evocative of much more ancient times. Perhaps Fran was drawing on legends and stories she herself had collected.

Lawrence lowered his head to Holo's level and peered at the map more closely.

The road leading up from the south passed through Pasloe and Ruvinheigen, past Kumersun and on to Lenos. On the map, of course, it continued on, through several towns with which Lawrence was unfamiliar, before leading into a vast forest.

As he followed the road to its end, his eyes immediately fixed upon a drawing of a wolf.

Evidently Hugues had taken up the pen in Fran's stead there, so it was his idea of a joke—or perhaps he was just being considerate.

Tolkien.

It was written in a large, flowing hand across the whole of the region.

In the drawing, the wolf seemed to howl out the name, and near its foot, small but very distinct, there it was.

Yoitsu.

The name of Holo's homeland.

"There it is," said Lawrence, and Holo nodded.

It was a small nod, barely a hiccup, but she agreed. "Oh, 'tis a real place after all."

Lawrence thought that was quite a joke for her to make, and when he looked at her face, she was smiling. He had imagined she might cry happy tears or be deeply touched, but Holo's smile was a tired one.

They had finally found it. After all that.

Lawrence was a little frustrated that his expectation had been wrong. "I never actually thought that we'd find it."

After all, he had only heard the name once before, as a detail in a story someone else had been telling. And based on that memory alone, he had promised to take Holo there, mostly because he had been so shaken by meeting the being named Holo. If he stopped to think about it logically, it would have been crazy to think it were discoverable at all.

But ever since embarking on this mad cloud-chasing quest, he had realized that even in this world, there were many eccentrics whose fascination led them to chase such tales.

And not all of those tales were made-up or exaggerated; he had come to understand that some of them were real. That alone lent some amount of meaning to the fact that he had managed to bring Holo this far.

Holo, similarly, seemed to be considering various things and did not become angry.

Lawrence rubbed her head affectionately with his right hand. Normally she would find this irritating, but this time she let him, giggling.

"Ask and ye shall receive." Holo quoted a famous scripture. "If a god once worshipped by humans says it, it's certainly captured a sort of truth."

"If it's given you that sort of optimism, then our work has succeeded."

Holo turned her head beneath Lawrence's hand and looked up at him. All the coincidences and fated moments had piled up to bring them to this instant.

Holo grinned and flashed her teeth. "Hey," she said, folding the map and letting slip something like a sigh. "Thank you."

Her chin lifted, nearing Lawrence's cheek.

A soft sensation pressed against his cheek, but the tender feeling of parting did not come.

Before his face, Lawrence's gaze followed Holo. Smiling, she ducked her head down and looked as though she was resisting the urge to shout something.

Lawrence smiled faintly, looking up with as much exhaustion as Holo had shown.

"I've been stabbed, beaten, and nearly bankrupted."

"Mm?"

"And after all that, this is my reward?" Lawrence said, closing one eye and putting his index finger to his cheek.

Holo kept her finger between the folded sides of the map and looked up at Lawrence. "Are you dissatisfied, then?"

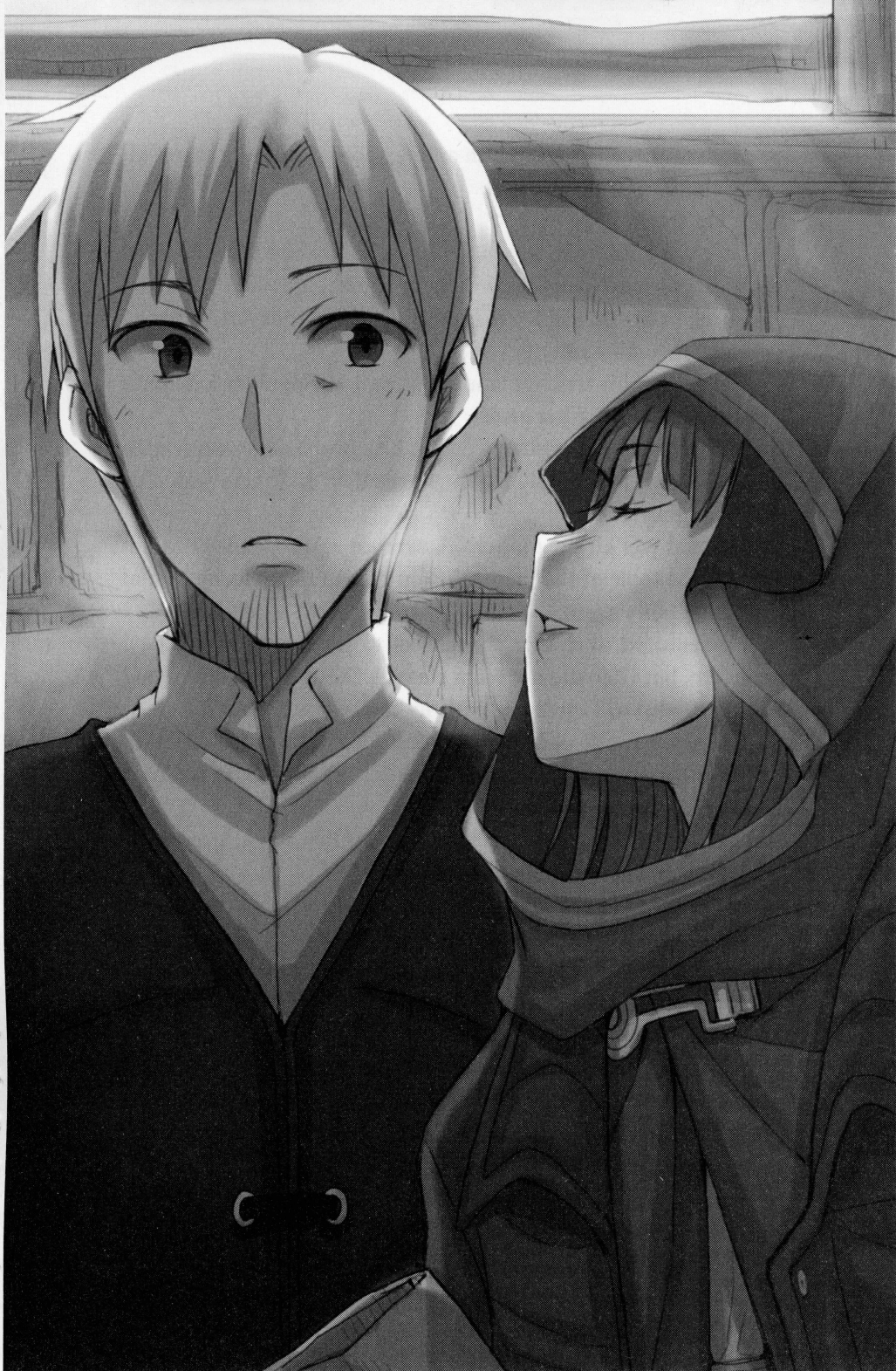
This sort of moment suited Holo the Wisewolf of Yoitsu much more than tears did.

"Certainly not."

"Mm. 'Tis well, then."

Lawrence's shoulders sagged, and Holo took his arm. She then took the envelope from Lawrence's hand and, keeping his arm under hers, adroitly slipped the map back inside the envelope. "'Twould be awful to lose it. You should hold it."

"Unfortunately, both my hands are full." His left held the other letter between its ring and little finger, with the thumb and index finger holding the wine cup. His right arm, meanwhile, was being held by Holo.



Holo took the cup from him and replaced it with the map. "I'll take charge of this," she said.

"Fine, fine."

Holo then immediately put the cup to her lips, but the wine was still strong. No matter how much she might love the draught, wanting to drink such harsh liquor so quickly spoke of some discontent in her breast.

Her grip on his arm tightened, and her tail puffed up. Lawrence resisted laughing at her pride.

Thinking about her struggle with Elsa over Col, it occurred to him that this was simply Holo's personality, and there would be no changing it now.

"So, did you all eat dinner?" Lawrence asked. If they did not get off the topic of the map, she would soon be accusing him of sentimentality again.

He ventured to change the subject to something of practical concern, but Holo did not seem pleased. "Your instinct for mood is truly...ah, well, I suppose nothing can be done about it."

Lawrence swallowed back the desire to tell her to reflect on what she had said just moments earlier. In times like these, at least, she truly was selfish.

"I do not believe they've eaten. That hardhead is so tiresomely dutiful about such things, after all."

It was hard to tell if Holo was complimenting her or not.

But if them having delayed eating was in fact the case...Lawrence nudged Holo over toward the source of the faint light, changing their direction.

"Mm?"

"This way's shorter. We'll stop by a tavern on the way and get some food. I'm fairly sure if we follow this street, we'll come out near the Beast and Fish Tail."

"Aye. Make sure to buy me some more strong wine."

At this Lawrence realized that Holo was still holding the cup. *Damn*, he thought, but it would be such trouble to go back to return it. Tomorrow would suffice.

Thus resolved, down the street they walked. It was well lit simply from the light that leaked through the window cracks of the houses along it. Houses on both sides were quite tall, which gave the street a mysterious atmosphere.

Looking ahead the passage seemed to grow quite narrow, but as they walked along, it was not indeed so. As they eclipsed doors and windows, the sounds and smells of people's lives flowed out, almost as though they were walking through the homes themselves. And then, abruptly, both sides of the street would be stone wall again, and there would be silence.

At their feet, too, earth would be replaced by stone, then earth again, the footing ever uncertain.

The scenes that appeared and disappeared were but tiny glimpses of lives, the overheard voices faint after traversing so many walls.

On and on they walked, reality becoming less and less certain.

It was like a world out of a dream.

The map was finally in their hands; the location of Yoitsu had been given to them. Aided by that euphoria, Lawrence felt a strange comfort in the seemingly endless nature of the street.

Perhaps that was why. For a moment his merchant's caution was left behind, and he murmured thoughtless words.

"Why did I choose Le Roi?"

He had only just been roundly mocked for being sentimental. If she had laughed at him once, she would do it twice, three times. And just as being drunk on wine made him so, the atmosphere of the street was itself intoxicating, and he spoke the words as though accusing himself.

"You wish to come to Yoitsu with me so much, do you?"

The most compelling argument would not calm a crying infant.

Holo smiled an exasperated smile and adjusted her grip on his arm, as though to soothe him.

And then, just as he was about to say something else, Lawrence interrupted himself. "I do."

His tone was so firm it surprised even him. He then looked to the still more surprised Holo and finally came to his senses. He hid his mouth with the map and letter, and looked aside.

Holo's gaze pierced his cheek. At length, though, he heard her muffled laugh. "Heh. We've just terrible timing, you and I."

"...?" Like a stray cat being tempted with food, Lawrence's caution was overcome by his curiosity, and he looked back at Holo—whereupon the malicious trap he expected to see had been replaced by her serene profile.

"I've given it much thought, and I believe you must go after the book. I said it, did I not? We must take the fruitful path."

If all went well, he would be three hundred silver pieces richer, and it might well contribute at least a little to avoiding the ruin of the north. Lawrence understood that much. And yet, the three hundred silvers was profit for Lawrence. The protection of the northlands was Holo's gain.

Considered thus, going together to Yoitsu would be profit for the pair of them, Lawrence and Holo together. It was not entirely unsentimental.

What Lawrence could not bring himself to accept was the reasoning behind throwing away the profit they stood to share together in order to pursue the more realistic profits separately.

"Come, now. How many of us are traveling?" Holo's words were brief, but the question was very clear. Her amber eyes flicked in his direction.

"...Three of us."

"And what does the lad stand to gain from going to Yoitsu?"

Lawrence found himself momentarily dizzy at the question. "W-well...but..."

"Col came upon us in the course of his own travels. He even set aside his own goals for that. He's a stronghearted pup, but a pup is still a pup. There is no deep reason for him to be traveling with us. He just needed to rest his injured wings. That's all."

They were desolate words and not ones that had simply come to her from nowhere. Holo must have talked to Col about what was truly in his heart, while both Lawrence and Elsa were away.

Just as Lawrence knew that his own decisions affected many others in the world of commerce around him, Holo understood the effects her decisions had on her own small pack.

"It was back in Winfiel, perhaps. Ever since seeing that fool Huskins, he's been thinking about it, it seems."

"Huskins?"

"Aye. Thinking about what he ought to do for the sake of his own town. The pup remembered how he'd set that thinking aside, in order to give himself time to rest and heal."

Lawrence had been paying less attention than he realized, at least outside of the marketplace. Not only to Holo, it seemed, but also to Col.

Holo smiled a sad smile at Lawrence's expression of surprise. "I'm hardly one to talk, but your face tells me you never even noticed, did you?"

"Ugh...," Lawrence moaned and nodded. There was no point in trying to hide it.

"Honestly...And then there was this last adventure up in the snowy mountains. He saw how Fran lived, and it woke him from his slumber. She seemed ridiculous to a wisewolf like me, but her straightforward way of living must have been so refreshing to him. Huskins was so old that even his methods were gloomy, but then there was the girl Fran, as beautiful and sharp as ice."

It was unusual to hear Holo describe her that way. And yet a moment's thought on Holo's disposition made it seem entirely appropriate. How could Holo fail to admire someone who would go to such lengths? Who put everything they had at stake in order to reach their goal?

And as the thought came to him, Holo glared at him with displeasure in her eyes. "Hmph. And then along came that hardheaded girl."

A boy who wanted to study Church law, and a hardworking girl trying to ensure the continued existence of her church in a town that revered a pagan god. As a final blow, it could hardly be more decisive.

"And the Church in this town plays a role in this, too. For this was the first time he saw a grand cathedral. An organization powerful enough to build such a thing could surely protect his home, he realized," said Holo and finished with a small sigh.

Lawrence could understand why Col had never opened up to Holo, to whom he had become so attached. Holo, who was called the Wisewolf of Yoitsu, whose true form would without any doubt see her called a pagan god.

How could he possibly confess his feelings to Holo, of all people?

Just as Philon could not approach the Delink Company, and just as an apothecary cannot patronize a tavern, just as a scale maker could not be friends with a money changer, so too could Col not confide in Holo.

More than she was an elder sister figure to him, she was, by the slimmest of margins, a wisewolf.

Even though he had seen her true form and been unafraid, even though he had clung to her tail—no, *because* of those things—Col could never forget that Holo was a wisewolf.

And given all this, Lawrence, too, could understand why Holo

had given up on his going to Yoitsu with her, and why, too, she had chosen to go to Kieschen.

They had to choose the most fruitful path: Rather than joint profit for two, separate profit for all three. As a reason for the three of them to make for Kieschen and end their travels as a trio, it was good and proper.

Holo had not chosen Kieschen as their place of parting, but rather as a place to begin a new journey.

"At the very least there's profit in it, and that dumpling head will go south, aye? She ought to take the lad with her. As much as her hardheadedness makes me ill, she's perfect for Col. Perhaps he'll even end up settling down in that village church of hers."

This last suggestion was of course a joke. But she did not suggest, even jokingly, that he ought to come with her.

"I've a thought," said Holo quietly, after several moments of silence. "Live long enough and you realize time is terribly long, and one's hopes so rarely come true. Just look at the girl who made that map for us, Fran. Even with all her resolve, it doesn't seem likely she'll die with a smile on her face."

Holo had lived so long and witnessed so many lives that her words had more weight than any easily understood platitude could ever have had.

"We should live with smiles on our faces, I think. That way when we meet again, we'll be smiling."

To do that, one had to abide by reason and realism, without a moment of sentimentality.

"It's the same in business."

"Hm?"

"'Profit even from loss,' they say," said Lawrence.

"Ah," said Holo, impressed, and her face twisted in a smile made awkward by the frustration she surely felt.

He could not just let her do all the explaining, and he could not

very well forget what he himself had said. They would cooperate with Holo's decision.

The narrow street became still narrower, and Lawrence let Holo walk in front of him.

From behind, her form seemed terribly small, and though she was close enough for him to reach out and touch, it felt as though she might disappear at any moment.

And in Kieschen, he would truly see her off.

It would be nice if they could meet again, smiling. It was not their final parting, not a deathbed good-bye, so there was nothing to fear. They would part ways the same way they had so many times before, over and over again.

Though he understood this in his head, the unease did not fade from his heart. If he were to let slip these worries, the wisewolf would surely either laugh or rage at him.

Lawrence put the question to himself: Was his trust in Holo insufficient? She was not a coldhearted girl. He was painfully aware of that much.

So what was it, then?

Lawrence watched Holo's small form ahead of him.

He wanted to embrace her with all his might, and never let go.

Even knowing how ridiculous that was, it seemed the only possible way to calm his worried heart.

The terrible self-loathing he felt was no figment of his imagination.

Lawrence took a deep, slow breath and exhaled it still more slowly.

CHAPTER FOUR



The next morning, the four of them took breakfast together.

While it was quite normal for travelers to have a meal before setting out for the day, for Elsa it was a wild luxury.

As a compromise, they ate dark rye bread and a few beans. To slake their thirst, she permitted some watery wine.

"Now then, about what we'll do next," started Lawrence, and everyone's gaze focused on him, save Holo. "We'll make preparations today and tomorrow, and so leave the day after tomorrow at the earliest. Today, I'll first go to Mr. Philon's place and work some details out with him and Mr. Le Roi."

Col nodded to prove that he was listening, and Lawrence directed his next words to Elsa. "It would be good if you came along, too, Miss Elsa, and talked about your own plans for what's to come."

Elsa cut even the hard rye bread up, rather than tearing into it, and brought bites politely to her mouth without dropping a single crumb. She treated it as though it were some sort of ritual practice in the concentration of her mind, but amazingly, she had no trouble listening to the conversation around her as she did so. "Very well. I need to send a letter to the village as well, so I'll ask their help in that."

Lawrence nodded and turned to Holo, who, like a child, was tossing beans up one by one into the air and catching them in her mouth. "And what will you do?"

Holo had just tossed aloft another bean, and her fangs showed as she opened her mouth to catch it. Her gaze moved from the bean to Lawrence, but moments later, the bean still landed perfectly in her mouth. She chewed it up, crunching, and washed it down with the thinned wine. "So long as you don't mind me creating new legends about a giant wolf, I've nothing much else to do."

Now that she knew the direction and location, it would be safer and faster for Holo to travel as a wolf. There was no reason for her to go all the way over to Philon's to hear about the conditions on the human road.

"So long as you don't mind me speaking as though I know the truth of the legend," said Elsa, smiling with only her mouth. She returned to her meal, earning a wrinkled nose from Holo.

Lawrence sighed and looked over at the table, whereupon was neatly spread the map.

"Still, 'twould be boring to stay here alone."

"Then it's settled."

Thereafter, each of them finished their breakfast. Elsa cleared her throat and began to teach Col about some finer point of scripture, Holo tended to her tail grooming, and Lawrence decided he might as well trim his beard while he was in a town.

There would likely be trouble upon arriving in Kieschen and difficult preparations in the meantime.

In light of that, the quiet serenity of the water well in the inn's courtyard, lit by the morning sun, was a precious thing indeed. The far-off sounds of the busy town gave the quiet a different feeling than the silence of a forest or field.

Lawrence had loved this quiet when he had traveled alone and had come to appreciate it even more since that time had ended.

Would he be able to continue on like this? He smiled a self-reproaching smile at the thought. He would probably abide. He would have to—and anyway, as he told himself before, this was not their final parting.

His worry was purely of his own creation.

"...Well, then." He brushed his hands free of crumbs.

The day had begun.

Lawrence had assumed that a shop catering to mercenaries would be mostly idle in the morning, but he was mistaken.

While the mercenaries themselves were certainly snoring loudly away in their wagon beds, the men around them were hurriedly buying up supplies. By their aura and manner of speaking, Lawrence at first took them as musicians, but apparently they were merchants who had spent their entire lives running their shops on the world's battlefields. Their cheerful demeanor came from their having long ago lost any fear of death whatsoever.

"Today I've only got one more troop coming by. When things are bad, it'll be ten or twenty in a single day," said Philon, shamelessly draining the contents of a cup that had been left on the table.

When the merchants had left, it was terribly quiet, like a storm had passed through the shop.

"So, many mercenaries come through?" asked Lawrence, surprised, and the general store owner chuckled knowingly.

"The bills are always made out to some big lord somewhere. If you're well-known and have a lot of territory, you can turn a hefty profit buying in one place and selling it off elsewhere."

It seemed likely that Philon had taken advantage of the situation in Lenos and done some speculation himself, but Lawrence said nothing.

No matter who was making what profit, as long as things were moving, there was no problem.

"So, then, what can I do for my extended family here."

"The map from Miss Fran has arrived," said Lawrence, and Philon's face lit up with excitement that was obvious even in the dim shop.

"Oh, that's wonderful!"

He held out his hand in anticipation of Lawrence giving it to him. But Lawrence had very purposefully not brought it with him.

In the silence that fell over Philon's own, Holo chuckled.

"So about the Tolkien region."

"Ah, there's a nice place," said Philon, sitting in a chair he produced from somewhere and taking up a quill pen. "Bit large, though."

Even on the map, Yoitsu had only been one small part of Tolkien. But once she made it to the region, Holo's sense of smell would surely lead her the rest of the way.

"There was a little village there. Less a village, really, than a group of shelters for woodsmen and hunters to stay in."

"And the name?" It was Holo who asked.

Elsa and Col were gazing at the swords on the walls and the parchment bundles on the shelves with intense interest, respectively, but simultaneously looked over at Holo when she spoke.

"It didn't have a name. Isn't really the kind of place you give a name. Did someone tell you they were born in Tolkien?"

Yoitsu, Holo was about to reply, but after a moment's movement of her lips, she said nothing and merely nodded.

"For people from around here, the name Tolkien doesn't mean much more than deep forests and mountains. Whoever it was ought to be proud they were born in such grand wilderness, I'd say."

Philon's tone was light, as though trying to emphasize that it was not worth thinking too deeply over.

But far from relaxing, Holo's face became even sharper. "Are the forests and mountains there yet bountiful?" She spoke slowly and distinctly, as though emphasizing each word.

Philon tapped his quill pen in his opened ledger, then rested his chin in his palm and regarded Holo. "Absurdly so. The word is that the deer are huge."

"And wolves?"

"Wolves?"

Holo looked intently at Philon. The silence that followed was unnerving for those who knew her true form.

Philon suddenly looked up to the ceiling, drawing Lawrence's gaze with it. "The area's thick with fierce wolves."

Holo drew a long breath, and her small body grew larger with it.

If Lawrence had dared to point out that she seemed about to cry, she would have surely denied it with fangs bared.

"Many of the mercenaries imagine themselves to be descended from wolves. And if you did have an ancestor among the wolves of Tolkien, I'm sure it would make you braver on the battlefield."

If a human was the child of something other than a human, it had to be God. Thus was the teaching that the Church spread, and even though Elsa was right there, Philon was speaking of such things as if they were common knowledge.

Elsa made no indication of any concern.

A man who made it his business to trade with mercenaries would have a keen grasp of what different sorts of people held dear.

"Are you...?" began Philon, but then suddenly stopped. If she was born in the north, but had come from the south, with her birthplace unknown, then the chance that the secret of her birth was a happy one was exceedingly low. He must have realized that.

"In any case, you're headed to Kieschen, yes? Or will some of you remain here or maybe make for Tolkien?"

"We plan to go to Kieschen. Would you tell us the way to

Tolkien from there? Unless you think we'd be better served by asking once we arrive in Kieschen."

Philon waved his hand to suggest that would not be necessary. He then closed his eyes, scratched his chin with his quill pen, and spoke. "Between Kieschen and the Tolkien region there's a path called the fur road. It's a common enough name, but it's the most important and profitable path for the fur trade in the area. It ought to be passable so long as it's not snowed in. On the way, you'll probably run into the territory of the Bruner mercenary band. I'll write you an introduction letter. If anything happens, you'll never find a more reliable band."

There was no way to tell whether Philon suddenly had sympathy for Holo's birth circumstances or was trying to butter Lawrence up in order to get a look at Fran's map. It was probably both, but there was no reason to refuse such a letter.

"My thanks," said Lawrence, since Holo seemed at a loss for words.

What had been merely old memories and tales had accumulated and finally become a map. Now that it had a form, the rest was so simple.

The path to Yoitsu was becoming clearer and clearer.

Lawrence patted Holo's back the way he would if she had had a bite of food stuck in her throat.

"And the two there? One was from Pinu, as I recall." Philon pointed at Elsa and Col with his quill pen.

Col was completely incoherent, but Elsa was not the least concerned. "No, I have business with Le Roi," she said in a cold and unwavering tone, straightening her posture.

Philon blinked in surprise, then made a great show of clearing his throat before speaking again. "I'm quite confident that anything he can do, I can do as well."

"Is that so? In that case, I'd like to send a letter."

Philon seemed rather taken aback by Elsa's lack of either surprise or levity. But he managed a feeble "Ah, certainly," at which Elsa finally smiled, a bit at a loss herself.

It seemed she had mastered an entirely different way of controlling men than Holo had. It was hard to say which was better.

"I've pen and paper. If you can't write, I'm happy to take your dictation."

"That won't be necessary. But I'm sorry to say I have no money."

Philon again thrust his chest out in the face of her straightforward admission. Yet he could not back out now. "I'll send the bill for the paper to Le Roi. That's no problem at all."

Elsa looked evenly at Philon for a few moments. Then she gave a slow smile and said, "If you please."

Philon feigned ignorance at Le Roi, who was running around making preparations for the journey. In fact, on the other side of the ceiling sat a mountain of goods, but he had not the slightest intention of parting with any of them.

While Elsa wrote her letter, Philon began tending to his own work, so Lawrence and the rest left the shop to bask in the sun.

There were still many people walking by, and it was certainly never boring.

"Once you find something, everything else becomes so clear," said Lawrence.

Perhaps Col was being considerate of the two, since he crossed the street to peer into a cobbler's workshop. He was about the age to be handling minor tasks in a workshop or trading company, after all.

Just a moment earlier the master of the shop had returned and smacked him on the head, evidently mistaking him for a lazy apprentice before Col had hastily pointed to Lawrence and Holo.

"Aye, now that we know our destination...all that's left is to point ourselves there and put one foot in front of the other."

They watched Col sit on the stone steps and relax, propping his elbows on his knees. He seemed sleepy, probably because the rays of the sun were warm.

"Simple and clear," said Lawrence.

Holo closed her eyes and chuckled through her nose. "Mm. Nothing to hesitate over."

Her clear profile was as smoothed as the just-shelled white of a boiled egg. All the problems and troubles that had tangled up with one another in her mind seemed to have been swept away, leaving it clean.

It seemed Lawrence really was the only one worried about the business of whether or not they would go to Yoitsu together.

He sighed a tired sigh to hide his frustration, then straightened and stretched. "Still, relaxing in town like this makes one reluctant to start traveling again," he said, looking up and squinting. Holo, too, looked up, opening one eye just slightly and glancing aside at Lawrence.

"With that reasoning, I'd have to give it serious thought."

It was too much trouble to quarrel, so Lawrence shrugged and ignored her baiting.

A goodly amount of time had passed when Elsa finished writing her letter. As logical as she was when speaking, when it came time to collect her thoughts on paper, she evidently found it much more difficult. She had ink on her face and hands, and she seemed somewhat hollowed out by the task.

"...Where did they go?"

"I gave them a few coppers and they went off to the docks. Would you like to go as well, Miss Elsa?"

Elsa shook her head wordlessly.

When Lawrence thought about it, he realized that having lived in such a small village, she had probably never had much cause

to put her thoughts into written words. Just figuring out how to address Evan had probably taken a good amount of time.

Lawrence considered this as his gaze swept the room.

"Where did Mr. Philon go?" Elsa asked.

"No idea. I seem to remember him standing up from the table, but..."

Lawrence looked and saw that the door to the courtyard was partially open, and some of the light from outside was doing its best to enter the gloomy workshop. Even if Elsa was a clergywoman, it was careless of Philon to leave the shop open with a stranger inside.

Or perhaps there was simply nothing to steal. The ultimate merchant could run a shop on nothing but credit. And with nothing but credit, there would be nothing to steal.

"Seems like we ought not to leave, then," said Lawrence.

"...Yes, that's true. But, er..."

"Yes?" Lawrence asked, at which Elsa's face suddenly looked utterly exhausted. Her tone turned apologetic.

"Might I go outside to take some fresh air?"

Lawrence smiled and watched her go. The door closed with a *thunk*, and Lawrence was alone in the dim shop. He sat in a chair and once more looked slowly about the place.

It was not small, but neither was it spacious. There was little in the way of decoration, but no space was wasted. The table, chairs, and shelves were purely functional, and there were exactly as many of each as was necessary. It was well cleaned, but not ostentatiously polished. Nowhere was there too much of anything, nor too little. It was a very relaxed space.

Lawrence took a deep breath through his nose and exhaled through his mouth.

The shop was quiet. Ideal for relaxing in.

Although if such a shop were his, he would need to add a window, Lawrence mused. There would need to be a sunlit place for Holo to groom her tail, after all. As he thought more on it, Lawrence waved his hand to clear his mind of the daydream. They were becoming more frequent as the days passed, and more specific, too.

There was not anything wrong with that, per se, but it was something he had to hide so long as he traveled with Holo.

Even if she had not been a wisewolf, he had to shut away the words deep in his heart: *Let's open a shop together.*

"Kieschen, eh?" he murmured with a smile. If Holo was not going to keep the promise, then Lawrence had no right to object. The resolve was hers; everyone else was merely cooperation. He would do everything he could to help her.

Lawrence had never traveled to Kieschen, but he had heard of the place. It was a well-to-do town situated atop a hill among the rolling plains. He had heard the town was filled with greenery. There were even some who spoke of it as though it were a town swallowed by forest. It would surely be a good place to show Holo and Col.

As far as Elsa went, she had been born in a village with an excellent view, so she might find Kieschen rather confining.

In any case, it seemed like a nice place, which was a relief. And being relatively close to the capital city of Endima, the wine and food ought to be good.

It would be a good place for good-byes.

Lawrence rested his cheek in his hand and spoke the words aloud. "A good place for good-byes."

He was normally stubborn, but he wondered if that wasn't part of his charm.

Why had Holo so easily given up on their promise? Or was the idea of ending their wonderful travels in sight of Yoitsu just too

ridiculously sentimental, just as she said? Or was Lawrence the only one who thought so much of what the other was thinking?

In his memories, Holo smiled. The smile was directed at someone he did not know. It was an unfair, reactionary thought. And then—

"Oh, has the holy sister finished her writing?" Philon entered the shop, pushing the half-open door from the courtyard all the way open.

"She seemed to be having quite a bit of trouble with it."

"Hah. That's not such a bad thing." He spoke so plainly that Lawrence found himself staring at Philon, finding him quite a mystery. This man who dealt with mercenaries wore a boyishly mischievous expression.

"I can't imagine there are many happy people who are well accustomed to writing letters to their loved ones. Wouldn't you say?"

These were the words of a man who was living his life with his eyes open. Lawrence smiled to hide his vexation, then sighed. "True enough. You want to be close to the people you love."

Philon nodded, satisfied, and sat himself down in a chair. On the table was the letter that Elsa had written; Philon picked it up and looked it over. He was not reading it, it seemed, but rather checking to see if the ink had dried.

"So, I couldn't help but be a little interested," began Philon, as he folded the letter up. He spoke as though he had been having a conversation with Lawrence about something in particular, right up until that moment.

Lawrence was briefly confused. He flipped back through his memory, trying to guess at what Philon was talking about, but Philon himself cut Lawrence's musing short.

"So I went and talked to the Delink Company myself."

Philon had claimed to Le Roi that he could not be seen getting

involved with the Delink Company. Had that been merely an excuse to turn him down? Lawrence considered that, then revised his thinking. What if it was not that, but rather that there was now some larger reason that justified the risk of contact?

"Anyhow, it turns out I got a hit."

"...A hit?"

It was a strange word to use—it implied a sort of good fortune, but depending on the context, the meaning could change quite dramatically.

A glance at Philon's face revealed that whatever it was, it was no good.

"My company supplies mercenary troops, and I act as a sort of agent for them at times as well. The Delink Company is the opposite. There was nothing in my ledger about any mercenaries heading for Tolkien, so I thought there might be in theirs."

He fingered the letter pointlessly.

"Even if a troop winds up taking prisoners of war, depending on where it happens, they'll be turned away at the gates. So when there's a rumor of war, they'll talk to companies ahead of time."

"Meaning?" Lawrence replied, worried.

It might have been that Philon had been testing whether Lawrence would turn worried or not. His eyes were full of sympathy. "Meaning that in all likelihood, there's going to be a battle for control of the Tolkien region."

Philon had come right out and said it in this moment because he was worried there would not be another chance, no doubt. If he was a considerate man, he would not have desired to deliver such news in front of a girl like Holo. Lawrence was the same way, so there was nothing to smile about.

But now that he knew, that meant he would have to be the one to tell Holo.

Unfairly, he wanted to quarrel with Philon on those grounds alone.

"But I have no idea what the goal is. It's just thick forests and endless mountain steppe. There are barely any villages worth naming. Or maybe they're thinking that's the perfect place to source slaves. Or else..." Philon's gaze was far away. "They've struck a lode of ore."

He had told Holo that the mountains and forests of Tolkien were bountiful. Given that, and given the prospect itself that Le Roi had convinced Lawrence to aid him with, anyone could have guessed what they were most concerned with.

A bitter taste filled Lawrence's mouth, but still—it was only one possibility.

Philon seemed to be thinking the same thing.

"Of course, I might be overthinking things. All the Delink Company said was that they'd received word from a mercenary troop that they might be bringing prisoners down from Tolkien."

If a rich lode had really been discovered, the scale of operations would expand considerably. There would certainly be at least one mercenary troop willing to venture forth to a remote location to fight for nothing but money. That was the simple fact of it.

Somebody would be unlucky, of course, but Lawrence was honestly relieved.

He did not think about whether or not that went against the teachings of God.

Holo would be going to Yoitsu alone.

He wanted her to encounter as little difficulty as possible.

A masochistic smile rose to his face at his own selfishness. Then:

"Come to think of it, I think the mercenary troop in question has a wolf on its standard."

"A wolf?"

Philon nodded and tapped at his temple with his finger. "It had a rather strange name. It's not a big troop, but it's been around for a long time. What was it...?" He took a moment to dust off the memories before the right one fell from his lips. "The Myuri mercenary band."

Holo had had friends in her homeland. Lawrence had not forgotten their names: Yue, Inti, Paro—strange names, like ciphers for something. And then there was the last name that Holo had murmured: "*Myuri.*"

"They're a small band, but I've heard they're well disciplined. Their leader's especially clever, it's said. I've never supplied them, though, so I only know the name."

Lawrence breathed in slowly as Philon explained, and when it was finished, he exhaled a long breath.

It was said that over the countless months and years, the fanged ones had dedicated themselves to battle, but finally lost, and become part of the earth. Many died during the battle with the Moon-Hunting Bear, and the rest died fighting humans in the aftermath. This was the story that Hugues had told them in Kerube.

Holo had made herself accept that there was no trace of the wolves that had once lived in Yoitsu, nor of their battles.

But now, as though fate were not such a cruel god after all, it seemed the wolves of Yoitsu had not been so weak.

A mercenary band flying the standard of the wolf, calling themselves Myuri and making camp near Yoitsu—this could not be mere coincidence. The simplest explanation was that Holo's friend Myuri was still alive and, having heard of the Debau Company's schemes, gone to occupy the homeland.

Lawrence could not imagine better news.

"Anyway, I thought this might worry your companion. Shall I try to find more information?"

Lawrence shook his head.

The Myuri mercenaries were encamped in the region of Yoitsu. Just informing Holo of that simple fact would be more than enough. He could so easily imagine her face, at a loss for words out of sheer happiness.

Being the bearer of good tidings was always a popular job. Lawrence wanted to tell her as soon as he possibly could. And yet, he realized that just as much, he did not want to tell her at all.

Because upon hearing of Myuri, Holo would surely be overjoyed. She would suppress her desire to go and see for a time, and go with him to Kieschen. But after she left Lawrence and company, she would cast her human form aside and immediately make for Yoitsu.

Lawrence would have to watch her go. He would have to imagine her reunion with them from afar, alone in the driver's seat of his wagon. There was no way he would be present for the moment.

Once she had reunited with Myuri and had that moment of joy, would she talk about all the things she had done, the time she had been saved by a human? If Myuri did not hate humans, would Myuri be glad to hear the tale?

Lawrence did not want to imagine what would happen next:

Mercenary bands never named themselves after women.

Even if Holo and Myuri had not been lovers, he was still a wolf from her homeland, one whom she had thought long dead.

Before the two giant wolves there would be his insignificant, copper-pinching self, and it was obvious to Lawrence how ridiculous he would feel. That was no place for him. He was not optimistic enough to think so.

He wanted to raise his arms and shout, *Huzzah!* At least the journey had been fun.

He could only smile at that.

So Lawrence did smile, and spoke.

"The world does not always go as one would wish."

Philon fixed Lawrence in his gaze. "You're right about that," he murmured with a sigh.

Perhaps the outside air had helped ease Elsa's fatigue, for when she returned to the shop, her usual dignified air had returned. She was not the type to eavesdrop, so she had undoubtedly not heard Philon and Lawrence's conversation. But she still seemed to sense the subtly changed atmosphere of the shop.

She looked at Lawrence with questioning eyes, but Lawrence pretended not to notice. A confession like that was not something given easily.

But if there was an answer to the question as to when to tell Holo about Myuri, asking God might not be such a bad idea, he thought.

If he told Holo as soon as she returned, her mind would surely be filled with thoughts of him. And even if it was not, it would certainly be a source of unease for her.

After all, Holo herself had said she would go with them to Kieschen, and there part ways. She could not very well just head off on her own for Yoitsu just because she learned about the Myuri mercenaries.

No—Kieschen would be the place to tell her, when they were about to part, Lawrence thought.

He really did not have much time left with her.

As shameful as he found his selfish thoughts, he wanted her attention to be on the travel that still lay before them.

The problem was whether he could hide that from Holo. It was probably impossible.

But when he considered the question of whether or not she would try to pry it out of him when she noticed he was hiding

something, the answer seemed to be in the negative. Regardless of how she had been in the past, the Holo of right now might well notice him hiding something, but she would keep silent.

And when they parted ways and Lawrence told her about Myuri, she would ask why he had hidden that from her, and she would laugh and laugh.

As any merchant would, Lawrence was making the most effective, profitable plan he could. It seemed sincerely loving someone made one's thinking faster, but turned it in the most ridiculous directions.

It had been an interesting experience, but it might be well to have this be the last, Lawrence mused, and it was as he smiled a self-reproaching smile and heaved a heavy sigh that the party returned.

"Come, we've brought gifts!" came the loud, cheerful words as the door opened with a slam.

Those within the shop had become used to the quiet, so the shock was all the more jarring.

In the brief moment of time it took to look up and wonder what the matter was, Col followed Holo in and set a shallow bucket filled with water on the floor. His breathing was ragged, and he sat down on the floor right there on the spot, exhausted.

The bucket had obviously been heavy for Col's small frame, and, ignoring Lawrence's sympathy for the lad, Holo stood there, her chest thrown out proudly.

"Look, we've found today's lunch!" said Holo, whose cheeks were also red and shiny with sweat.

Lawrence approached, wondering what it could be, when his nose was assaulted by a pungent smell. Its source was soon very clear.

Within Col's bucket swam a number of dark eels.

"Magnificent, aren't they? We were wandering around the

docks when we came upon some fool who'd tipped over a great barrel. Inside were all these eels, and they were scattered around like windblown soot!"

The exhausted Col was unable to get to his feet, so Elsa, worried, crouched down beside him to check on him. Meanwhile, Holo smiled triumphantly.

She smelled bad, and her sleeves were damp.

"Don't tell me you stole these."

"Fool! We were asked to help catch them, and this is our reward! I was the best at catching them. Wasn't I?"

Prodded by Holo's question, Col smiled a weak smile.

Philon came over as well and peered inside the bucket. They were fine eels, big and fat.

"Well...still, you ought to change your clothes," said Lawrence.

"Mm? Oh, aye. I am a bit damp. Well, I'll leave the preparation to you. Come, Col!" Holo chattered away, and Col, having finally caught his breath, managed to stand. Given his exhausted state, anyone watching would have wanted to stop him.

But the one who actually did was neither Elsa nor Lawrence.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha!" He laughed a boisterous, infectious laugh, head back and hands on his hips. No actor in a town square could manage such a performance as Philon did naturally in that moment. "Goodness, but you're amusing guests indeed! Don't worry, we'll make ready some hot water and handle the preparation."

"R-really?"

"If you walk around outside like that you'll catch cold. I'll have the lads heat a bath. As far as a change of clothes goes, hmm...," said Philon, thinking, at which point Lawrence got some words in.

"I can get a change of clothes from the inn."

"Hm? Oh well, let's do that, then. In the meantime, we'll deal with these eels. They'll make for an unexpectedly grand lunch!"

Lawrence wondered for a moment if in taking a bath here at

the shop, Holo would let her ears or tail be seen, but doubted that Holo would let such a thing happen.

Elsa had helped Col to his feet, but Holo grabbed his hand and pulled him after her as she followed Philon farther into the shop. Lawrence watched her go and sighed helplessly.

He felt foolish for worrying so much about so many things. Holo had burned his gloom away with a brightness that no gold coin could match.

Lawrence scratched his head and looked down into the bucket of eels, a small smile on his face.

"Well, then, I'm off to the inn," he said to Elsa, who was watching Col's bucket with concern. What stopped him just short of leaving the building was not a reply from her, but rather a statement.

"I'm coming, too!" she said, just as an eel splashed noisily in the water. She flinched away from it as though avoiding a dangerous animal and came alongside Lawrence, keeping a wide berth from the bucket.

She seemed rather scared of the eels.

"I have some spare clothes I can lend you," she said.

Oh? thought Lawrence to himself. He was no Holo, but he had a certain ability to see through people's lies.

But there was no reason to point it out, so he simply nodded, and the two left the shop.

Just as in any other town, the streets of Lenos had names. Every lane, big or small, had wooden signs erected, indicating that it was such-and-such street. Even the small alleys were well paved with cobblestones and had lovely wooden signs.

Lawrence was admiring one as they passed when Elsa suddenly spoke up.

"I have been thinking," she said, almost as though talking to

herself. But after a pause, she continued. "Can I be of any use to you?"

"Huh?" Lawrence thought he had misheard, but this time Elsa looked right at him and spoke very clearly.

"Can I be of any use to you? To all of you?" Her honey-colored eyes were as serious as ever. "Especially you—I know you don't want to go to Kieschen. Am I wrong?"

Lawrence looked back into those big eyes, smiled a thin smile, and replied. "That's a surprising offer."

He anticipated her anger, but Elsa's way of being angry was not what he expected. "It is not at all surprising."

She looked steadily back at him.

The street was crowded, and if she kept walking along while looking aside at him, she would have easily been run over by a wagon. Before replying, Lawrence pulled her out of the way as a cart rumbled by, taking no notice of the pedestrian traffic as it went.

"It is surprising," said Lawrence. Pulled close like this, Holo would have pretended bashfulness or looked up at him winsomely, but Elsa did neither. Of course she would not, Lawrence admitted to himself, but he wondered if Evan the miller knew better and felt a moment of manly frustration.

"I owe you a debt, you see," said Elsa.

From the conversation at the inn, Elsa seemed to have simply drawn some conclusions. The source of the distress between Lawrence and Holo was because they could not be in two places at once.

But if Elsa could be in one of those places, she could help solve the problem—it seemed an oversimple, childish idea, but more than that, it was a very clear, Elsa-like proposal.

However, even if the Delink Company had not insisted on certain conditions, it would still not have been a solution. No matter

how optimistically Lawrence regarded her, Elsa was not suited for the combat of trade.

"I'm very grateful that you would offer," said Lawrence with a smile. He did not give his reason for refusing, because it was true that he was grateful.

Despite all her quarreling with Holo, Elsa showed no trace or hint of a grudge. Even merchants, who would cooperate with their mother's worst enemy if it were in their own interest, were rarely so magnanimous.

"I see...," said Elsa, nearly sighing her deep disappointment.

"Might I ask why you offer?" Lawrence asked, though it might have been a pointless question. Elsa's strong faith in the teachings of God might mean that helping others was simply a matter of course for her.

But his merchant's intuition compelled him to ask anyway. His ears were even better than Holo's when it came to sensing whether someone was being truly selfless. He guessed there might be a reason other than pure selfless kindness for Elsa to make such an offer.

And just as he guessed, she replied without anger. "First, I've been turned away by the church here."

Undoubtedly the church in Lenos had no time for people like Elsa, after the fur riots. Before Lawrence could offer any words of comfort, Elsa made a troubled face and continued. "The second reason is...that we're alike."

"Alike?" Lawrence was surprised by this unexpected statement.

Elsa nodded and turned her head to face him. "Our true feelings are obvious, yet we both insist on putting on such great facades of responsibility." She had the face of a great priest, one who could peer into another's heart, see the pain that lurked there, and bring them comfort in its stead.

Lawrence hastily averted his eyes. He had the feeling that everything inside him was being discovered through and through.

"I left my village with just that facade. I can't say I don't have experience with it," said Elsa, then looked ahead again.

Surprised, Lawrence regarded her profile. "But finding a priest for your village is a proper reason, isn't it?"

"It is. And yet..." Elsa seemed conflicted. But it was not in the girl's nature to remain indecisive. "Mr. Lawrence."

She looked up at him and said his name. Her face had a vulnerability to it she would never show him in the village of Tereo. It seemed as though she wanted to confess some sin and that Lawrence was the only person she could tell. At the very least, as an older man, perhaps he could give her some perspective.

"This is something I should confess only to God."

Lawrence met Elsa's pained gaze with a smile. "Do not worry. I have every intention of reaching the kingdom of heaven, so I'll pass your message along."

It was a good joke coming from a stingy merchant like him, and Elsa smiled a strange, exhausted smile.

But as a joke, it seemed to have had its intended effect.

Elsa turned forward and rubbed her face, then looked down. She murmured a quick prayer before composing herself. "The reason I am searching for a priest to take charge of the church in my village is because I do not wish to hold the position."

Lawrence knew he could not betray surprise. A confessor's role was only to listen. He took a breath. "And?" he prompted quietly.

"Despite my position, I've had a faint wish." Elsa looked up, suddenly seeming appropriately fragile for a girl her age. She seemed on the verge of tears, and her usual flush of spirited strength was nowhere to be seen.

Elsa would never have shown this face to a stranger. The only other one who would have ever glimpsed it would have been

Evan the miller. And as soon as the thought came to him, Lawrence realized the truth.

She gripped tightly the hand-carved seal that she wore about her neck. The seal given to her by someone close to her when she had left the village.

"If possible, my wish is to...someday make Evan my—"

Lawrence did not allow her to continue further. He put his finger to her mouth and, with a sigh, spoke. "You should speak the rest of that sentence not to me, but to him."

The clergy were not allowed to marry.

But if there was a church in a town, then someone had to be in its employ. Elsa had taken that duty all by herself, but it had never been her wish to remain alone.

The facade and the truth.

Knowing Elsa had heard his conversation with Holo and that she realized how similar they were made Lawrence feel too ashamed to look her in the eye.

"But if that's how you've always felt..." Trying to preserve his dignity as the older man in the conversation, Lawrence looked up at the sky, taking a deep breath.

After a span of time, Elsa seemed much calmed. "It makes me very happy. Just the sentiment alone is enough." She looked at him with an expression that made Lawrence rue his own powerlessness.

So he added something. "We merchants are very harsh about borrowing and lending. We don't say such things lightly."

A merchant would happily squeeze debt from a family member. Lawrence thought about saying so but decided there was no need.

Elsa nodded as though forcing herself to accept his words, then smiled awkwardly.

The bell signaling midday rang a series of irregular strikes.

Lawrence spoke only after the echo of the bell's toll had faded into the sky.

"Still, your relationship with him was rather obvious, I must say."

Elsa looked up at Lawrence with eyes wide in surprise. "Did you suppose that we were trying to hide it?"

That in and of itself was a surprise, as Lawrence's wry smile made quite clear.

But as Lawrence smiled, beside him Elsa cleared her throat. Lawrence looked, and it seemed as though she were brushing away the embarrassment of her confession and purposefully resuming her serious face.

"So, even if I cannot directly solve your problem, I am still clergy. If someone is hiding pain in their heart, I can at least listen to their troubles. After all..." Elsa's expression hardened. "...I confessed *my* heart."

She was a clumsy bargainer. But for the straightforward Elsa, it was a good try.

And it was true—she had told him about Evan, and her desire to give solace to anyone suffering in the gap between their heart and their facade was a sincere one.

"You're right." Lawrence raised his hands in surrender.

Elsa cleared her throat again. "To be blunt, the way you two act is unnatural."

Having it thrown in his face so directly made Lawrence feel a touch irritated. "I'm a human, and she's a wolf. There's nothing 'natural' about it," he replied.

Elsa drew a sharp breath at these words, but pressed on nonetheless. "That is not what I mean."

"Then what do you mean?" Lawrence immediately replied.

"Why should two lovers not hold hands?"

Hearing this, Lawrence froze in his tracks. And not out of anger.

He was shockingly embarrassed, and his hand came up to cover half his face.

"I simply can't understand it. You say she's a wolf, but there are many such stories in the books my father left behind, so..."

Lawrence held up his other hand in an attempt to get Elsa to stop. He was too humiliated to so much as look at her. He stared off into the distance, waiting for his pounding heart to slow down.

Holo had made fun of him for being "girlish," but he was suddenly shocked to realize how pure and naive he truly was.

"...Pardon me," Lawrence managed with the last of his merchant's composure, and then he just stood there for a moment. For the first time, he knew the destructive power that words like "two lovers" could have when used outside of a poem.

"N-now you see, Miss Elsa, that we live here in reality. Just as we cannot exist in two places at once, solving our problem is not so simple as joining hands."

On that count, Holo's reasoning for going with him to Kieschen was perfect. It was so logical that any merchant the world over would applaud its correctness.

"If that's so, why won't you fight for it? You say that without having even tried! You—"

"—!" Lawrence himself did not know the nature of the verbal explosion he had just swallowed down. But his hand had reached out and grabbed Elsa's robe by the collar.

"...My apologies," he said, immediately coming to his senses and releasing her.

Instead of fixing her clothing, Elsa gave Lawrence a sharp glare. But her anger was not at his outburst, but rather that, despite the

intensity of his words, he was still hiding his true feelings behind his own facade.

"I have tried...to fight."

"Truly?" shot back Elsa.

"Truly or not...that I don't know." Lawrence walked on, leaving the flustered Elsa aside. Her face still a mask of disbelief, she trotted to catch up to him. "What do you mean, you 'don't know'?"

"I mean exactly that. Of course I want to go with her to our original destination. I want to go to her homeland. But the circumstances won't allow that. And the logical course of action is to do as she says. It's best for her, and it's best for me. And it's best for Col."

The words *the adult decision* had a nice ring to them.

Elsa seemed about to say something in response to Lawrence's remarks, but in the end she stopped herself. She looked down, frustrated and pained.

Lawrence himself thought he ought to go to Yoitsu with Holo. No, not thought—wished. But it was impossible to overturn Holo's reasoning. If he did, it would be astonishingly selfish of him, and he could not imagine that Holo would be pleased by such selfishness.

Throwing everything recklessly away and getting a tidy, happy ending only ever happened in stories. In reality, life had to continue.

Holo had spoken with a tired smile on her face—living involved a lot of time. Life was too long to throw everything away just for one moment.

Lawrence and Elsa walked wordlessly along, and finally the inn came into view. The first floor was filled with craftsmen taking their lunch and travelers, too. There were many faces, some happy, some not.

"Life has ups and downs" was not a mere figure of speech. It was reality. Not everything went smoothly, and if one did not compromise somewhere, they would never get through it.

All heroes had to face many difficulties and countless dangers—but not everyone who faced difficulty and danger became a hero.

Most of them just died along the way.

Lawrence was a traveling merchant. No one would ever fault him for being extremely cautious, and cautious he ought well be.

Lawrence quietly climbed the stairs. He heard no creaking floorboards, but given the small footfalls behind him, Elsa was following him up.

Seen from the outside, he was surely a pathetic sight. Perhaps too pathetic to leave alone.

But this was the way of the world.

Lawrence allowed himself to feel at least a little self-pity as he murmured the words in his heart and smiled a sad, tired smile.

"Can there not be a miracle?" came Elsa's short, sharp words.

"Can there not be a miracle?" she said again, as Lawrence looked over his shoulder.

Elsa had stopped on the stairs, looking up at Lawrence, who was about to round the landing.

"You and she came to our village and created a miracle, which saved us all. Can you not..." Elsa swallowed her words and seemed to be holding back tears. "If a miracle cannot save you as well, then how can I go on teaching the word of God?"

Her honey-colored eyes looked up at Lawrence, penetrating, but there was no trace of anything like hostility in them.

Lawrence scratched his head and averted his eyes. Elsa was wholly and completely, from the bottom of her heart, a servant of God.

"I know it's selfish of me to say so, I know that, but—"

"No, you haven't said anything wrong or mistaken. It's simply

that we, or at least I, am not a pure enough soul to be saved by a miracle," said Lawrence, stepping down the stairs and crouching down in front of Elsa. He reached out and straightened the collar that his earlier violence had set askew.

Elsa did not try to brush him away or show any sign of disgust. She merely watched him.

"It turns out, the Myuri mercenaries are close to her homeland."

Her face turned confused, as though wondering what he was getting at. Lawrence checked her left and right lapels for evenness, then flattened them with a pat, at which Elsa did not so much as flinch.

"Myuri, you see," he continued, "is the name of someone my companion separated from, centuries ago in her homeland. Someone she thought long dead." Lawrence had turned his back to her, so he did not know what happened next.

But it seemed to Lawrence that her expression did not change very much.

"He's probably alive, though. She doesn't know yet. I'm going to tell her in Kieschen, when we part ways."

"Why?" came the short demand from behind him.

"Because I want her to concentrate on the journey with me until then. A mercenary band would never name themselves after a woman. It's ridiculous, but I'm jealous. We've gotten this far, I may as well confess it."

Lawrence put his hand out to the room's door and looked back at Elsa.

"I wished that Myuri would have stayed dead. Horrible, aren't I?" He sighed and pushed the door open. He wanted to take a step inside and then slam the door behind him. "I should think that if miracles kept happening to a man like me, that would be a god whose word you couldn't spread."

He began unpacking bags as he searched for a change of Holo's

clothes. Once she left, he would have to sell them—the expensive clothes she had demanded.

Behind him, Elsa too entered the room and from her bag produced a set of clothes.

"That is indeed awful of you. No doubt God will punish you." Her blunt words were somehow comforting.

Lawrence stood, a smile still lingering on his face, and made ready to leave the room. But unexpectedly, Elsa's words followed him. "And yet I still do not understand."

Looking over his shoulder, he saw that she was plainly angry.

"Feeling the way you do, yet trying to act rationally, it's—I simply don't understand. That's what's unnatural. You should choose one or the other."

"It is none of your business," said Lawrence flatly. He added a troubled, complicated smile as a courtesy. "This is our problem and our decision. It is not your place to say what we should do. Not even as a teacher of God's word."

He added that last excuse, but it was just that: an excuse.

Elsa had been speaking from her heart, as Lawrence was perfectly aware. But he could not let her go on.

"You're quite right." Elsa took a deep breath and tears spilled from her eyes. "But I wanted to repay my debt to you both. It doesn't seem to me that either of you are acting in your own best interests, so I wanted to at least—"

"Me, no. But she is, I assure you."

Lawrence was the only one being stubborn about wanting to go with her to Yoitsu. Holo wanted to do so, if possible, but only after considering other possibilities. That was the extent of it for her.

"Two lovers," Elsa had so shamelessly said, but the truth was much less clear. Lawrence found it easy to think of the words as a bitter irony. So, the news about Myuri did nothing to put his heart at peace.



But Elsa simply looked back at him. Her honey-colored eyes were noble and sharp, like the pommel jewels of a sword. "Then my question still stands. Why won't you turn and fight back?"

For a moment, Lawrence did not understand what he was hearing.

"It's like there are two Evans. Your indecision is so infuriating I can hardly stand it. Why won't you just act the way you honestly feel? Why are you convinced that swallowing down your own opinion is best for her? God is the friend of the righteous. You have nothing to fear!" As Elsa went on, her voice rose, and with these last words, her shoulders shook.

The content of her ranting had a logic to it but was also incoherent. She herself seemed not to know exactly what she was going on about. She was probably just speaking her thoughts as they came to mind.

But Lawrence understood what she meant all too well. At the very least, he understood the feelings that had welled up from inside Elsa.

But the most important thing was that Lawrence had taken all that, forced it underneath "reason," and ascribed it to Holo.

For trying to act so wisely, it seemed he had been quite stupid.

"You're right about everything," said Lawrence in an exhausted tone. His words came without a hint of deception. "But I'm a simple merchant."

"So think!" Elsa seemed to have forgotten why she herself was angry. Yet she still glared up at Lawrence, continuing her verbal assault. "Don't pray, think. If you say you've turned away from God and deserve no miracles, then stop praying and think like a merchant!"

It was a strange entreaty for her to make. Elsa had nothing to gain from it, yet she was truly angry at Lawrence and Holo.

"You merchants use all sorts of unbelievable techniques, don't

you? You have means available to you that can only be called magic, don't you? Or if...if you're hesitating to use such despicable methods, then be at ease." Elsa straightened and directed her unwavering gaze right at Lawrence. "I will do all I can to assure their correctness in the face of God's teachings."

This was where he should laugh her off surely.

If a hundred merchants heard the story, then those hundred merchants and twenty of their friends would all agree that Holo's way was the right one, while handing Elsa a glass of wine and telling her to calm down and have a drink.

But Elsa's view was very attractive. She was telling him to *think*.

Elsa herself was no fool. She was certainly smart enough to understand there was a certain logic to Holo's way. But she was saying all of this because she could not stand to watch them go through with it.

So at the very least, it was worth putting his head to work trying to find a way to respond to her with some kindness. She was, after all, offering to make excuses to God for whatever underhanded methods he might use. It would do to give the matter some thought, at least, before giving up.

He could not very well just turn suddenly defiant toward Holo, but there was the possibility that he could claim some small business reason for him to go.

And it was obvious what he should consider: He had to find a way to force that faraway company to sell the book without him going to Kieschen and without them learning the facts of the matter.

Kidnap the company master's daughter or wife and threaten him? Put a curse upon him? Or hire a band of mercenaries?

It was rather fun just thinking of such mad possibilities.

But in truth, merchants did not possess the magical abilities that Elsa had misunderstood them to possess. Even money

orders, those mystical documents that let you move money without carrying heavy coin on your back, were not so mysterious once you understood how they worked.

They were simply a way of moving goods down the invisible canal called credit. Money was not being magically transported. There was a principle to it. Even if one used credit backward, all they could steal was money, not life.

Lawrence's thoughts got that care and were suddenly caught.

Use credit backward?

The words struck him as strange, and for a moment he realized his cognition had gone idle.

Elsa looked at him curiously and was about to say something, but Lawrence stopped her with a raised hand. He suddenly had the feeling there was something he had missed. As though there were keys to this problem scattered all over Lenos—golden keys that would unlock the path for him to travel to Yoitsu with Holo.

The hope beat almost painfully in his heart as the scenes he had witnessed since arriving in the town flashed through his mind.

Lawrence looked at Elsa.

Elsa, who feared nothing, seemed to flinch away from him. Surely that was not his imagination.

Then, a few moments later, Lawrence arrived at the clear realization that he was smiling.

"Incidentally, if I really did think of a way to make a miracle happen, what would you do for me?"

It was surely the first time he had ever asked, "What would you do for me?"

"...I-I'd give you my blessing."

But even when intimidated, Elsa was a splendid clergywoman, so Lawrence kept some of his sudden self-admiration in reserve.

What he had thought of was such a contemptible plan that he would have laughed off the very idea had it not been for her urging.

* * *

When Lawrence and the others returned to Philon's shop, there was no one inside. The door that led into the courtyard had been left open, and when Lawrence popped his head through and took a look around, he saw a temporary charcoal-fired stove in the middle of being set up.

"Oh, you're back, are you? This'll take a bit of time yet, so you can wait inside."

Whether he had been hired with coin or was simply an acquaintance, there was a cook-seeming fellow expertly skinning the eels while, around him, apprentices stood expectantly.

Lawrence nodded at Philon and ducked back into the shop, where Elsa was watching him uncertainly.

"You're the one who put me to this, remember that," said Lawrence with mischief in his voice, at which Elsa's shoulders tensed in a flinch.

But her gaze was unwavering and her lips tight.

"I'm grateful, truly. I would've gotten old before thinking of such a thing on my own." Lawrence smiled and took a breath. His destination was the back of the shop.

"In my father's letters," said Elsa suddenly to Lawrence's back, "he wrote to tell me to go my own way. In his books there were many stories of modest happiness borne from compromise, but that no one had ever been truly satisfied with mere compromise. And..." She grasped the hand-carved seal around her neck and put on her own mischievous smile. "...There were many stories where even when failure came, it brought satisfaction with it."

A business was built from successes and failures piled atop one another. Lawrence had known that for a very long time.

"You're quite right," said Lawrence, and with long strides, he headed down the hallway, deeper into Philon's shop.

It was well cleaned, and he could tell immediately that it

received fresh air daily. Interesting that despite the narrow hall and low ceiling at the back of the shop, it was brighter than the shop's front, where customers were received.

But bright places were also places where voices carried well. After no time at all, he heard the happy voices of Holo and Col.

The room had originally been a kitchen, but before the earthen floor that seemed to have been lowered several times, there lay neatly folded the still-smelly clothing of Holo and Col.

Lawrence pulled aside the curtain that hung as a partition and peered inside and was immediately greeted by the back of a stark-naked Col, who, despite trying to escape Holo, had been caught as she ladled hot water over him.

"Aye, there you are! The water of Nyohhira is a hundred times hotter than this!" she said appropriately enough.

Of course, Col had his own ladle to plunge into the basin, so he was giving as good as he got.

When he noticed Lawrence, though, Col hastily hid behind the basin. Holo, meanwhile, looked at him as though a new prey animal had arrived.

"If you play around like this, you're going to catch cold. Here," said Lawrence, tossing large towels at the pair, who had long since finished actually bathing.

Col caught his with his hand; Holo, with her head.

"I've put each change of clothes at the door. Col, yours are from Elsa, so make sure to thank her."

"I-I will!" said Col brightly, then immediately sneezed.

Holo and Col were both completely naked. Col dried himself off, then hurried to put his clothes on.

"You, too," said Lawrence, at which Holo sighed an unamused sigh, shaking her tail rapidly. "Honestly," he said. "I suppose no one saw you?"

Her tail wagging flung a shocking amount of water around, but

her hair received different treatment. Holo wrung it out with her hands, the water in it dribbling to the floor. "Just what sort of a fool do you take me for—*achoo!*"

When wet like this, her delicate body and pale, translucent skin were like a polished jewel of some kind. But her sneeze made her seem so silly, and combined with her body, she suddenly seemed very childlike.

Lawrence sighed and went to help Holo dry her hair.

"Is lunch prepared yet?"

"They're making the stove now. Just a bit longer."

"Mm. As the men at the docks said, 'They're best covered in olive oil and just roasted.'" Her hair was beautiful, but for all that beauty it held a great deal of water. No matter how Lawrence brushed, there seemed to be no end to it. "This sort of bathing isn't bad, but in Nyohhira you can have strong, snow-chilled wine brought to you. How about that, eh?"

Holo rambled on from underneath the towel. She seemed a bit cold—perhaps the water in the basin had mostly cooled.

"Certainly, and since everyone in the area does likewise, they all keep the prices good and high." Lawrence took the towel off her head and wrapped it around her shoulders.

Holo brushed aside the hair that had fallen over her forehead. "Mm," she replied. "Come, my body's next," she said flirtatiously, putting her hand to her hip and looking up at him as though to say, "How about it?"

If he flinched, the game would be over. He looked down into those amber eyes so filled with challenge, then slowly closed his own. "Hurry and dry yourself off and get dressed," he said.

He could practically hear her cheeks puff out in irritation at Lawrence's failure to become flustered. Did her actions come from being simply unworried about the end of their journey, or



was it an act put on precisely because of that approaching end? Lawrence did not know.

But just as Holo was so talented at such little performances, there was a limit to how much Lawrence could hide.

"And what shall I do once I'm changed?"

"I want to find Mr. Le Roi. Help me."

Poor Le Roi would be running all over town, trying to buy provisions without any connections in a market where everyone was hoarding for their own speculation. But Lawrence did not want to find him in order to extend him any sort of helping hand.

Holo soon realized this. She gave Lawrence a searching look. "For what purpose?"

Rivulets of water fell from her curves.

The hot water had cooled, and it was cold in the room.

Holo's wet skin was rapidly cooling, and her eyes were even more icy than usual.

"There is a mercenary band," said Lawrence, close enough to Holo that the droplets on her body threatened to wet him, too, as he looked down at her, "near Yoitsu."

"...Wha—!"

"They call themselves...the Myuri mercenaries." To his shocking words, Lawrence added still more shock. Mysteriously, though, it was in such times that one's mind became strangely clear.

"Find Mr. Le Roi for me. I need to see him." Lawrence looked away and made as if his business was done, but Holo grabbed him by his lapel. Her face was beyond anger.

"What's your aim, then?"

"I have a proposal for him."

Holo bared her fangs and through the gaps between them hissed a sort of sigh. But before that could gain enough mass to

become an explosion, Lawrence put his hand to Holo's left cheek. "I'm not going to break any promises."

He bent down so that he was even with her red-tinged amber eyes. Those clear, beautiful eyes.

"I'm a merchant. I would never break a contract so easily."

His words carried a twofold meaning.

Lawrence stood. "But I am going to propose a change in plans. So far as circumstances allow," he added quietly.

"Do you—" Holo started, but her voice caught. She strengthened her grip on Lawrence's lapel, as though to steady herself. "Do you mean to say that you won't be going to Kieschen?"

"That depends."

Lawrence was quite sure that it was his own conceited nature that made him think Holo was about to cry.

In truth, she was surely and deeply disgusted—disgusted that this fool was up to one of his fool schemes again.

"...Don't you tell me that you're..."

"Yes. Jealous," said Lawrence lightly, returning Holo's look. "Of Myuri, of course."

Holo was at a loss. She was so appalled and disappointed that Lawrence could practically hear it.

"Or is Myuri a woman? In which case we can just laugh about this." He stared right at Holo, who finally averted her gaze.

Then, slowly, she shook her head. "But come—Myuri is not what you're thinking—"

"But while you're reunited with him, I'll be alone on my wagon with my thoughts. To be frank, I hate that idea."

He took Holo's small hand in his and realized that it was quite cold. He took the towel that still hung around her shoulders and began to dry her face and neck with it.

"What will you do?" she asked.

"Make it so we don't have to go to Kieschen. That's why I need to talk to Mr. Le Roi right away. I ought to be able to save Col and Elsa the trouble of going to Yoitsu as well."

Lawrence moved the towel from Holo's neck to her upper arm, but she brushed it off, annoyed. "Can you do such a thing?"

No matter how perfectly elaborate his answer, if there was a single flaw in it, she would not miss it. Those keen, unforgiving eyes of hers gazed at Lawrence.

For some reason Lawrence found himself smiling and replying with a self-deprecating tone. "I hope to. This...," he began, then realized the reason for his smile. "As a merchant, this is the only way I can turn and fight."

Holo drew her chin in, as though she had taken a bite of something bitter. She looked up to Lawrence in disgust, as though to say, "You're hopeless, you fool."

And then she did say it. "You fool."

Lawrence smiled and nodded cheerfully. "If it doesn't work out, I'll give up. That's the truth."

Holo could tell when someone was lying. He looked to her as though to say, "Tell me it isn't," at which she drew her chin down even farther and made a grumbling sound.

Holo's gaze was an exceedingly dubious one.

Lawrence cleared his throat and continued. "Don't you think I've matured some?"

He had been beaten, kicked, thrown away his life and his coin purse, all to protect Holo. To follow her, to stay with her. If this was the result of all that, it had not been such a bad journey.

Holo neither laughed nor raged, and by now she seemed past even frustration or shock. She looked at Lawrence's smile and slumped, exhausted. And yet her face was very near to burying itself in Lawrence's chest.

"You are a fool," she said quietly and sighed. She picked up the

towel from where it had fallen and roughly wrapped it around her body. "Truly, such a fool!"

Lawrence was fine being a fool.

He watched Holo roughly dry herself off, happily content to be a fool.

It was just as Elsa had said—he felt so much better having decided to fight back.

Holo stepped out of the path, her feet pitter-pattering on the stone and earthen floor. She threw the towel at Lawrence.

Her tail had just been washed, true, but in any case it was fully fluffed. "So we have to find that meat bun now?"

"Yes."

"Honestly...you'd best hope we're back in time for lunch!" declared Holo, huffing a deep and irritated sigh.

There was something distinctly animalistic about Le Roi. Not in the way he looked, of course, but in the keenness of his senses.

The bookseller was negotiating at a trading company's loading dock when he turned at the sound of Lawrence's footsteps.

And the place was by no means quiet. It was noisy with the shouts of men and neighs of horses, and all the din of everyday chatter.

"You've got a frightening look on your face, my friend," said Le Roi jokingly and grinned.

"That's my line."

Le Roi's tone was even friendlier than usual, since behind Lawrence he could see Holo's form.

If Holo had not been there, the bookseller would have looked at Lawrence as an untrustworthy enemy.

"If you're looking for provisions, I've already managed to buy up quite a bit."

The right half of Le Roi's face distorted skillfully. He looked

over his shoulder. "Never mind, then," he said shortly. The man with the trading company waved him off as though already fed up with Le Roi's attempts to force him to sell.

"Walking around with a lady companion and an expression like that, no merchant alive will trust you," said Le Roi to Lawrence, as though they were just passing by each other.

Lawrence's shoulders slumped.

"As I'm only too aware," he replied smoothly.

"So, what business brings you here? Don't tell me you've gotten cold feet."

In the world of credit and trust, sudden changes of heart were avoided above all else. Outright failure was far and away more preferable.

"No."

"Well, what, then?"

"Something's come up rather suddenly, I'm afraid. I won't be able to go to Kieschen."

They left the shop and walked alongside Le Roi, making for a less crowded part of the street. They passed around Holo, who let a bit of distance open between her and the two men before following.

"Are you mad?"

"My companion asked me the same thing."

Le Roi clapped his mouth shut and glared at Lawrence. But there was confusion on his face. He could not grasp whatever it was Lawrence was thinking. "Please, no games. I'm expecting a thousand silver pieces in profit from this deal."

He spoke as though he was a mercenary boasting of having killed a bear with nothing but his fists.

But that was not what Lawrence smiled at. He simply could not help but find it amusing that he was actually torn between his own pathetic jealousy and a deal of such size.

"You'll excuse me, but I won't be kicking aside an agreement

we've already settled on." Le Roi's round face distorted in a grimace from one edge to the other.

Lawrence lightly cleared his throat. The cold air tickled the inside of his cheeks. "About the company in Kieschen—it's a rather large one, with a special agreement with the Delink Company, correct?"

The Delink Company would not agree to provide only dark-skinned girls unless the customer was of the highest quality. And a company able to make such demands would not be a small one.

Still cautious and unable to see where Lawrence was going with all this, Le Roi nodded slowly.

"Which means they must deal very regularly with many other companies. I'm not mistaken in thinking so, am I?"

"...I suppose not. But what of it?" Le Roi was obviously growing impatient, but Lawrence did not want to skip to the end of his explanation just yet.

He gulped and continued. "If so, I ought to be able to remain in this town and still aid you in your purchase."

The bookseller stopped in his tracks, the whole of his being working to anticipate what Lawrence was going to say next.

Lawrence looked over his shoulder to follow him, so sudden was Le Roi's stop. The sun was just then low in the sky, so he squinted when he spoke. "With money orders."

"Money orders? How? They're just a convenient way of moving money."

Lawrence looked past Le Roi's vast bulk to the idle Holo behind them. "Not if we use them to harass." Lawrence faced forward and began walking again. Le Roi was still confused, but Lawrence was confident he would follow.

"Mr. Lawrence. I have no idea what you're trying to say."

Curiosity killed the cat. Once he knew, he would be unable to resist getting involved—no matter how dirty the trick.

Lawrence turned back to Le Roi. "We'll issue multiple money orders to the company in question from many others."

"Huh?"

"Each for maybe a few dozen silvers. Or perhaps a hundred or two hundred." Lawrence was impressed with the smile he managed. After all, the sort of brute-force method he was describing was something only the wealthiest merchants could get away with.

"We'll change all the names and send all the money orders in at once. The company in Kieschen will start cashing them without worrying about the strange coincidence, but as they start running low on coin, they'll begin to get suspicious—but it will already be too late. The coin will be gone from their coffers, and the money changers will catch wind of this and hike up their exchange rates. And what will the company do then? The money orders will keep coming in, including ones from their regular customers. Which ones are the malicious ones and which are from partners they can't afford to anger? And in the midst of all this, customers and trading partners keep coming. 'Buy this, buy that, pay what you said you'd pay'...the company will be a mess."

The fat Le Roi's smooth skin normally looked like flour-dusted dough. But now it was as white as if it had been carved from rock salt.

"And that's where you come in. 'You seem to be in trouble, so I'll take these money orders off your hands. But there's a condition,' you'll say."

And of course, all the money orders Le Roi would be taking charge of would be from the Delink Company, so there would be no need for Le Roi to actually have the coin.

At that point, the outcome would be simple. It all depended on Le Roi's nerve and talent. "And that's where I'd tell them I heard they had a certain volume in their possession."

"Exactly," said Lawrence with a wide smile, every bit the clever merchant hawking his wares—though Le Roi could hardly be blamed for looking at him aghast, as though he considered Lawrence unworthy of the name "merchant" for thinking of such a despicable tactic.

But as a plan, it was sound. There were, of course, some flaws.

"I understand what you're...proposing. But...is the Delink Company willing?"

Le Roi was not worried about the damage to their credit—the Delink Company would bring in several other large companies in Lenos and send the money orders through them, and at that point, their own name would be clean as a whistle.

The problem was that a large amount of coin would be necessary to issue the money orders.

"They will be. After all, coin is awfully valuable in Lenos right now."

"Ah—!" Le Roi raised his voice.

The Delink Company would be able to make a tidy profit on the exchange rate.

"So long as there's a difference between the currency markets of Lenos and Kieschen, there's profit to be had. And fortunately for us, the value of coin in Lenos is clearly much stronger. Shall I show you the figures?"

There was a *smack* sound as Le Roi's hand hit his head. He groaned, but his eyes had a calculating, contemplative look in them.

Given the plan Lawrence had proposed, if the Delink Company agreed, in that moment Le Roi's acquisition of the book was assured. There would be no need for him to spend the duration of the journey to Kieschen agonizing over the uncertain future and how to exploit this or that weakness in order to get them to sell the book.

No merchant who plied the lonely road alone could underestimate such peace of mind. Le Roi himself had had to change his own plans after hauling a load of scriptures into Lenos. Such mishaps happened all too easily and were likewise easily imagined.

But with this plan, Le Roi could head out on his journey with real certainty. He looked at Lawrence like a true believer seeking to confess.

"Are you...serious about this?"

He was hooked.

Lawrence's answer was short. "Of course."

The bookseller nodded a mute and defeated nod.

They immediately headed for Delink. When there was a change in plans, it was best to declare them quickly. Yet—when preparing for a hard right turn in a swiftly moving wagon, it was best to at least lay one's body over the load.

Lawrence had naturally considered this and had been careful not to underestimate the company.

Which was why he had again brought Holo to the Delink Company. This was to prove to them his resolve—for once before he had left her there for money, only to throw the money in their faces and take her back.

When they arrived at their destination, it seemed the company's four masters were in a meeting together. When he was led into the room, they all came in to meet him.

There would be no turning back now. He could not let himself regret not making every possible effort, doing everything he could do.

The job of explaining had passed from Le Roi to Lawrence. The forcible use of money orders was more important to him, as was avoiding the trip to Kieschen.

As they listened, none of the three men, Eringin included, twitched so much as an eyebrow. Far from it—when he was finished listening, with his hands still folded upon the table, Eringin said only this: "Well, shall we take this route?"

It was Lawrence who now disbelieved his ears, despite being the one to propose the plan. He replied without thinking. "Truly?"

Eringin made a deliberately surprised face, as though to say, "Are you not the one whose proposal this is?"

"Er, of course, this was my proposal, and if you're agreed, then I'm deeply grateful. But, ah, in addition, there's one more favor I'd like to ask..."

"I assume you yourself do not wish to go to Kieschen, Mr. Lawrence."

Of course—there had been the inquiry from Philon earlier, and now Holo was with him in person. It did not take a particularly clever person to put the pieces together.

Eringin chuckled. "You may be the one to have proposed this method, Mr. Lawrence, but it's still quite consistent with our requirements. And if you're willing to do this, we've no reason to refuse. After all, we've considered it ourselves."

"Wha—"

Lawrence was not the only one whose face came up in surprise. Le Roi was stunned.

"However, no reasonable mind would come up with such an abusive technique, so even if someone did think of it, they would hardly propose it to us, or so we had concluded. Much less could we suggest it to you—you'd be instantly suspicious."

It was not at all clear whether Eringin was teasing or not. But from the ironic twist at the corner of his mouth, Lawrence decided he was telling the truth.

"But you've accumulated a bit too much age and experience to consider such crude, reckless things. Am I wrong?"

Holo was the only one at the table to laugh at Eringin's words. The slave trader faced her and smiled pleasantly.

"There aren't many ways for a man to stay young. Your companion there was an excellent decision. I mean no offense—I am being quite sincere." He looked straight at Lawrence.

Lawrence did not know how to answer, but he knew enough to politely accept the words as given.

"I daresay I understood the moment I saw your companion. Two heads are better than one, they say. There's wisdom in that."

"Though we have four heads," added one of the other masters. Evidently there were limits to how far even a man like Eringin could go alone.

"We therefore agree to your proposal. I trust you don't mind us handling the details?" It was said in a businesslike tone, to which Lawrence and Le Roi both quickly replied.

Only the Delink Company understood the connections between companies and preparation of coin necessary for this. And given the underhanded tactics they were using, even if the book was safely obtained, it would be difficult to carry it out of the town.

Lawrence and Le Roi would be leaving all those myriad details to the Delink Company. And in exchange, they would be playing the villains.

That was undoubtedly why Eringin himself had not proposed the possibility to them.

"It will be good business, I daresay. Though one does have to feel bad for the targeted company." Eringin sounded genuinely sympathetic, rather than simply saying the words because he thought he ought to.

They all stood and shook hands, and thus sealed the new agreement.

For the men of the Delink Company, the shaking of hands

came before the signing of the contract—for truly, their business was closer to Philon's world than to anything else.

"Now then, may God grant us success." With those words, the meeting was closed.

Le Roi looked to Lawrence, a strained smile on his face. "We've really done it now," he seemed to say.

Lawrence found himself wanting to echo the sentiment. With this, he no longer had to go to Kieschen, and Le Roi alone would take on the role of the villain.

And the price would have to be paid.

"About the fee you promised," said Lawrence as they exited the room into a hallway so quiet it seemed to swallow sound.

"Oh, please, please, not now."

"Later, then."

"No, that's not—that's not what I mean," said Le Roi, taking a quick look around. Eringin was still conferring with his colleagues in the meeting room and had yet to emerge. A short distance away there was a single smart-looking boy standing next to the door he had just closed.

"But—"

"We can talk about that once everything else is finished, can't we?" said Le Roi, looking up at Lawrence mischievously. "I will be playing the villain here, but we know they're going to surrender immediately. I could never content myself if I skipped paying the introduction fee on such an outrageous scheme. And more than anything else, I may not be Mr. Philon," Le Roi said, smiling an innocent, boyish smile. "But I want you to owe me a bit of a favor, eh? Are you truly a traveling merchant? I'm having a hard time believing it."

Back when he had spent his days with his eyes on the ground hoping to spot a single copper coin, Lawrence had longed to hear

such words. It was a bitter irony that now that he had discovered something he valued above gold, he was hearing it all the time.

Before he answered, he glanced at Holo, who seemed to be keeping a bit of a distance, perhaps to avoid interfering with their conversation. "I'm quite a failure as a traveling merchant, I should say. So you're not wrong about that."

Le Roi grinned, but there was not so much as a trace of a smile from Holo. Perhaps that was because her own plan had been so quickly kicked aside, or perhaps it was the revelation of Lawrence's jealousy of her pack mate in Yoitsu.

But she did not seem angry so much as utterly at a loss. He was certain that if he asked her if this was so, he would receive an affirmative answer via her thrown fist.

"But still, Mr. Lawrence. Worry yourself not. Forcing people to do something they loathe with a smile on my face is my nature," said Le Roi.

Frustratingly, it was these words that Holo finally smiled at under her hood.

Le Roi had been doing just that when they had first met him at Philon's shop. Prick an opponent's conscience, and one could make them do whatever they wished.

"So this sort of thing is right in my wheelhouse. And the bigger the prey, the greater the feeling of accomplishment, eh?"

Elsa had been exactly right about Le Roi. His avarice made him trustworthy.

Lawrence nodded. "I look forward to seeing your results," he replied, and left it at that.

EPILOGUE



When they returned to Philon's shop, there were piles of eel roasted and waiting for them. When informed of this, Philon was even more overjoyed than Holo—and he had a suggestion.

"We'll need some strong wine, then! The eels from the river here go best with a good strong wine. And we have to celebrate the execution—or amendment, I suppose—of our contract!"

Lawrence answered Le Roi's joke with a wry smile. "Mr. Philon and the others will be there as well. We'll need enough for..."

"Oh, I'll buy. But in exchange, pitch in something nice from your wagon bed, eh?" Le Roi seemed to have given up trying to buy anything in Lenos.

Lawrence had no intention of turning it into a bargaining point, but he decided to let himself go along with Le Roi's suggestion. "I'll leave it to you, then."

"You may safely do so. I'll ask you to promise not to eat any eel until I return, though!" said Le Roi, then vanished into the crowds.

Even given the noisy, boisterous streets, it felt suddenly quieter. Call it "presence" or what one might, there was no denying that Le Roi was a loud man.

Lawrence and Holo, too, began to walk, and it was Holo who suddenly spoke up. "Well, now we're rid of all our nuisances, eh?"

This came with no small amount of sarcasm, but Lawrence's expression remained steadfastly calm, since he felt her words perfectly described the series of encounters they had just had.

"It's an ironclad rule for all traveling merchants, you know—when going on a journey, travel as light as possible."

"Hmph." Holo sniffed and made an irritated face.

But when Lawrence took her hand, she did not shake it off. This was undoubtedly her lingering frustration with Lawrence's earlier defiance.

Lawrence looked up at the church steeple. It was visible from anywhere in the town.

He told himself that despite it all, he would have God's forgiveness.

It was just then that Holo pointed down an alleyway. "This way is shorter, is it not? And I've had my fill of crowds."

Lawrence agreed.

Though one might well drink wine to warm up, too much would only make one feel worse.

The moment they left the throng for the alleyway, they entered a silence quite different from the one that had pervaded at the Delink Company, and Lawrence felt as though his body became palpably lighter.

Holo seemed to feel similarly, and she exhaled a small sigh.

The alleyway was narrow but well kept and somehow comforting.

While it was not the case that Lawrence had entirely lost interest in the sort of business that took place only on wide, crowded avenues, it was not only such things that he would pursue now. He would go to Yoitsu with Holo and put his surely foolish fears about Holo's reunion with Myuri to rest, and there his journey with Holo would end.

After that, he would return to his old travels.

Holo had once jokingly said that she could laugh at a single memory for fifty years, and Lawrence felt that he himself would be doing much the same thing. That would be enough to keep him looking to whatever reunion they might possibly have.

That would be enough, surely. At the very least, he would have the satisfaction of knowing he had done everything he could.

It was just as Lawrence was musing on this that Holo spoke up.

"Hey," she said casually.

"Hm?" Lawrence replied and saw that under her hood Holo had a somehow troubled expression on her face.

"There's something I want to ask."

What could Holo possibly need to know? "What is it?" asked Lawrence with honest curiosity.

"Mm. Why is it...that you're so set on going to Yoitsu with me?" Her expression made it seem as though she had asked a question that must not be asked.

And once it was put to him, Lawrence himself realized that it had indeed been a forbidden question.

"N-no, come now, do not make such a face. 'Tis strange to me. You're no fool, truly. You've brains enough to understand reason. So why was my notion to go alone so hateful to you? Jealousy of Myuri, aye, I could believe that once you'd heard of him, but that was a later addition, was it not? You still wanted to go with me, even before you'd heard about the mercenaries. And as for why, I simply cannot..."

Holo was so overwhelmed that she trailed off, her words becoming indistinct. Such a thing was a rare event.

It must have been his expression. Lawrence hastily put his hands to his face, trying to compose himself. "Is it so strange?"

He was not, of course, referring to his face.

Holo was well aware of that. But she hesitated for a moment, her face averted, before she nodded. "It seems so to me."

"..."

Lawrence did not know how to explain his own feelings in that moment. "Despondency" would come close, perhaps.

He had been so sure that if he showed some fight, Holo would be pleased, even if she was irritated. But instead, this.

His disappointment and shock was enough to make him want to quite literally empty the contents of his stomach onto the curbside. What to do? He felt wobbly on his feet, like his spine was the only bone he had left, like the slightest breeze would knock him over.

"Truly, you said it yourself many times over, did you not? That if we were to separate, it was not a final parting? That it was not death?"

Lawrence was among those in the world who ought to be happy simply walking down a narrow street, holding the hand of a girl as beautiful as Holo.

But as he looked at Holo, his body leaning and unsteady, he simply could not accept it.

It was not a final parting. He knew that. As a merchant, going a year or two years without seeing a friend was a matter of course. It was hardly unendurable.

So he himself could not understand the reason why it *was* unendurable, in the case of Holo. Did he love her so much? Was it because he was a human and she a wolf?

Those were the only reasons he could think of, and in that moment, they seemed true enough to Lawrence.

But he could find nothing to answer her with. So it was Holo who opened her mouth and continued speaking.

"I do believe I'm the one with the right to anger here. You're saying you don't trust me, are you not?"

She was right. He loved her, and he thought she felt the same way about him. He wanted to believe that.

But as Elsa had so angrily pointed out, he could not just admit it. He did not know why. Was it because he was a merchant, who deep in his heart trusted nothing? Who doubted people and goods alike?

"I don't much want to say this, but I trust you'll forgive me if it hurts to hear. But I...I've no intention of simply saying good-bye once we part. Must I explain absolutely everything to you?"

Lawrence looked at Holo with shock at her words.

"Wh-what?"

"What did you just say?"

"Must I explain everything?" She had said it as though she had been hiding some great secret, but Lawrence could not fathom what that could possibly be. Some crucial, bone-deep *something.*

Lawrence thought—he thought more seriously and deeply even than he had thought when trying to find a way to avoid going to Kieschen—and all the while, Holo's hand remained in his.

Holo, too, thought, while looking up at Lawrence, her brow furrowed.

"Ah!" they said simultaneously, and it was surely no coincidence.

"Come now, surely you did not—"

"Er, no, I—!"

Holo, still shocked, looked at Lawrence, who clapped his hand over his mouth and averted his gaze. Could something so absurd be true?

Lawrence put the question to himself, but it was the only thing he could think of. Once the thought had come to him, he could imagine no other possibility.

Despite the cold, his cheeks burned. And Holo's gaze upon him was still hotter.

"Heh-heh...so that's how it is, eh?" He had not heard her use

this appraising tone in a while, as though considering precisely how to grind him up.

Lawrence flinched away like a child, and despite feeling as though he had seen something terrifying, he could not help but look back at her.

In her handsome face, her red-tinged amber eyes glittered with strange light. "Aye, well, I suppose I must admit I've done likewise." She chuckled. It sounded, somehow, like she was smacking her lips.

Lawrence closed his eyes in resignation.

The first time they had come to this town, when Holo had suggested they end their journey, Lawrence had taken her hand and said this:

"*I love you.*"

But what had Holo said in reply to that? Had she even said anything at all?

"Ho, ho, you truly are a fool," said Holo, not even bothering to disguise her malicious tone.

Lawrence prepared himself to receive a killing blow, a blow worthy of any dragon slayer in any tale. And then—

"Hmph." Holo sighed an exasperated sigh, and then into the breast of Lawrence, she snuggled herself. "Did you suppose I would tease you?"

"...Huh?" Lawrence opened one eye and looked at Holo.

"Fool."

Lawrence had hunched himself over, so that when Holo stood on tiptoes, her eyes were even with his. Pathetically, he had no idea how much time they spent like that.

When he opened his eyes, he saw Holo right in front of him, a bashful smile on her face.

"Honestly, to not accept the truth unless you have it spoken to your face...if you were anything but a merchant I'd rip your

throat out," she complained, puffing her cheeks out in irritation right in front of Lawrence, who was still hunched over.

"And anyway, did you yourself not urge me to fight myself? You had the nerve to do that, and now look at you!"

"?" Lawrence looked at Holo, befuddled, at which Holo was momentarily shocked. She sucked her cheeks in.

"Do not tell me that all you meant by that was that I should fight over Col with that stone-headed girl? Was that all you meant by that?"

What else was there to mean? Lawrence looked into Holo's redly glittering eyes, his mind spinning futilely.

"Ah...O-oh, I see..."

"Why, you fool...!" said Holo, discontented tears welling up in her eyes as she looked at him.

You don't have to play the wisewolf.

Lawrence had meant the words from the bottom of his heart.

But if Holo had taken that statement to its utter extreme, it meant that any and all un-wisewolf-like behavior would be accepted. And what would be the perfect example of that? It hardly needed saying.

Even as Holo herself had found it pathetic, she had wanted to meet Lawrence again after they parted, and the thought had been tormenting her all this time.

No wonder he had found Holo's frustration at losing Col, and her venting of that frustration upon him, so unusual and amusing. He had only been seeing the surface of those actions. The true reason for the displeasure behind her actions was the regret she felt at their rapidly approaching separation. She had been trying to rid herself of those feelings.

She had been taking out her frustration on him, but the frustration had been this: *It's your fault I'm feeling this pain.*

"You truly think only of yourself, don't you?"

Expect nothing. Dream of nothing. Cut your losses to nothing. It was the nature of the merchant. But perhaps it was nothing more than cowardice.

"Especially when it comes to me."

Her cheeks puffed up angrily, and she grabbed his ear, forcing him down even lower. Now that it had come to this, Lawrence could not help but want to find a retort.

"Well, you're no better," he said.

"Mm?"

He had not planned to use it, but Lawrence now pulled the other envelope from his jacket. It was the letter from Hugues that had come from Kerube, along with the map.

"I wasn't going to show you this," he began and extricated the letter from the envelope, even as Holo continued to hold his ear.

It was a two-page letter, the handwriting neat and fine—hard to imagine coming from a man as large as Hugues. The letter captured Holo's attention, and she seemed to forget that she still held Lawrence's ear.

The first page began thus: *Regarding the methods we not of Men have used to do business among them in their towns—*

"I didn't see any reason to irritate you. But that I've wished for this so terribly it's foolish..."

...Surely *you could have guessed that much?* he wanted to finish, but he did not.

Still holding Lawrence's ear and staring dumbly at the letter, a single crystalline tear tumbled from Holo's right eye. Time seemed to stop, and her movement made no sound.

Holo looked back to Lawrence, her voice quivering from her happy tears. "Aye, 'tis what I hate about you." She bared her fangs, the very picture of utter fearlessness. "But you fool, you stupid fool, I...I do love you so."

In that moment, nothing mattered. Not Kieschen, not Yoitsu. Not Myuri or Col. With those words, every letter of scripture ever written had been rendered meaningless.

He had handed Holo a blank contract with his named already signed hugely on the bottom. And all he had wanted on it were the words that Holo had just given him.

"...Honestly. In all my centuries in the wheat fields, I saw many pairs of males and females, but I never once saw a male as foolish as—"

But Lawrence did not let her say any more. Still hunched over, his ear still in her hand, he pulled her into a tight embrace.

Holo seemed a bit surprised by this but rested her head on his shoulder, and he felt her sigh an exasperated sigh.

"I suppose we've to leave Col in the care of that bun head, then? And you've already prepared for our last travel as a pair, so I suppose the matter's settled. Come, then." She slid her hand around to his back and gave it a light pat before continuing. "Let's get back to the shop and take our meal, eh?"

Holo tried to pull away from Lawrence, but he strengthened his embrace and did not let her go.

"Mm, come now," she chuckled, but sounded a bit irritated as she pushed against Lawrence's chest.

As she moved, he caught her freshly bathed scent, like a fall of spring rain.

Holo's sweet, fragrant scent.

Lawrence put his lips to her neck.

"Come, you, that's quite enough..."

Her words stripped him of his restraint. Here in the narrow alley, the tumult of the avenue did not reach them. Neither could the church steeple see them here. God could not see them here.

"Uh—come, you. H-hey. You're not going to—"

If it came to strength, she was no match for him. Lawrence held her tighter, then pushed her against the wall. Then—

"Not...not here...!" Holo tried to push Lawrence back, with earnest strength this time. "You...foo—"

"*You fool*," she said, but in the end, the words did not reach Lawrence's ears.

When they arrived at Philon's shop, the interior was deserted, with happy voices emanating from the courtyard farther inside. Evidently the midday meal had already begun.

Lawrence and Holo went through the door to the courtyard, side by side. Elsa and Col were the first to notice them, and their eyes went instantly wide. Philon was next, followed by Le Roi, who spat his ale out in surprise.

But Holo was completely unconcerned, smiling as she pulled Lawrence along behind her.

Philon broke the brief but awkward silence. "Ah, looks like we'll need more eel!" he said, heading back into the shop.

"Ah, I'll help!" added Le Roi.

Col watched the two adults go and was just about to say something to Lawrence before Elsa pulled him bodily into the shop as well.

Left behind were only Lawrence and Holo.

"I wonder what got into them?" Holo said with purposeful obliviousness, a smile still on her face.

Lawrence, though, said nothing. It was not that he had nothing to say—his cheek still hurt too much for him to open his mouth.

The blow had briefly stricken sight and sound from his five senses and had additionally made a mess of his sense of balance.

"Oh ho, seems our eel is good and cooked, eh?"

The oil that had been drizzled over them sizzled away in the stove, a sign that the eel was nearly perfectly ready.

Holo found a knife and plate and adroitly made ready a bit of eel for Lawrence. On top of it all, she had the nerve to bring it to his mouth. "Come, open wide!"

Lawrence kept his mouth resolutely shut. It was not that he was embarrassed—he simply wanted her to know that his cheek still hurt too much to open his mouth.

"You'd refuse food from my hand?"

At such chiding words, his mouth opened nearly reflexively. And as soon as it did, pain shot through his body. At this, Holo's satisfied smile remained so.

Lawrence fought back the pain, closing his mouth over the bite and chewing.

The eel was fragrant and tasty.

He could tell that it was a bit overcooked, though, and there were places that were bitter and burned.

Lawrence stared off into the air as he chewed the eel. Beside him, Holo stuffed her cheeks, making happy little noises.

He could see the church steeple at the end of his gaze, as though it were quietly looking down on him, amused, chin in its hands.

The End

AFTERWORD

It's been a while. Isuna Hasekura here, with Volume 14. We've just passed four years since my debut, but somehow it feels like I just wrote an afterword about how three years had passed since my debut. Time flies like an arrow!

By the time this book comes out, the year will have already changed, but at the time of this writing it's still December. Thus, as I take a quick look back on the year, it makes me realize that... wow, I really had a lot of fun this year. I went to Hong Kong (for work, though!), I went skiing in Hokkaido in the winter, and in the summer I went again just to sightsee. I went to Okinawa and Kyoto, and I even got my driver's license.

And yet I still managed to write four volumes a year for the first time since my debut, so maybe it really is better to make time for fun instead of just shutting myself up at home.

Given that, I resolve to play hard again this coming year! Although there is some small chance I've misunderstood the causal relationship between having fun and making progress on my manuscripts...

Nonetheless, when this book comes out, I'll be starting my fifth year since being published, which feels like a bit of a turning

point. It makes me want to work harder, start new things, and accomplish everything I can.

That said, as the number of years since my debut advances, so does my actual age. Just recently, and also a month ago, I got invited to the weddings of college friends. This was the first time I'd been thus invited, and I found myself shocked with the realization: Augh! I'm getting to be that age, too!

Incidentally, I didn't own a suit, nor did I know how to tie a tie. So I headed to the department store and got a suit, then hastily taught myself how to put on a tie—*grrk!* And after all that, when it came to wearing a suit like a normal member of society...it made me think about how there are tough guys out there in the world who get invited to weddings every month, who must be the product of intense training on how to appear calm. If you went to a wedding every month, the wedding present costs would really stack up.

By the way, in reading books about medieval Europe, it seems that wedding traditions back then were rather violent. For example...whoops, if I say anything more I might spoil the surprise!

And now having written this much, I find I've filled my pages.

This is going to be a pivotal year for the series.

Let us meet again in the next volume!

Isuna Hasekura



Thanks to the silversmith Fran, Lawrence now has a map of the North. But Lawrence's gladness at the thought of finally being able to take Holo back to her home is short-lived, as upon revisiting Lenos he is embroiled in the strife surrounding a forbidden text. It is said that this mysterious book contains details of methods that threaten the land of Yoitsu itself. But in trying to get his hands on the book, Lawrence, who must return to the marketplace, finds himself running out of time to head for Yoitsu with Holo... Pressed into making a decision he may ultimately come to regret, which option will Lawrence choose?!

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